

Child Marriage During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Empirical Study in Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract

Child marriage remains a major social challenge in Bangladesh, with the COVID-19 pandemic worsening its prevalence, especially in rural areas. This study examines how the pandemic influenced a surge in child marriage by exploring both its prevalence and underlying factors. Guided by Ulrich Beck's Risk Society and Jürgen Habermas' System Crisis theories, it used a mixed-method approach combining surveys of 85 underage respondents, five in-depth interviews, and six Key Informant Interviews across four union parishads in Jashore district. Findings reveal a sharp rise in child marriages during 2020-2021 compared to 2019, driven by school closures, economic hardship, social insecurity, and weak legal enforcement. While girls were most affected, boys also faced early marriage due to romantic ties, dowry, or family responsibilities. This study urges for urgent action through strict law enforcement, universal birth and marriage registration, rural awareness, stronger social protection, and better coordination across sectors.

Keywords: *COVID-19, child marriage, school closure, risk society of modernity*

1. Background of the Study

COVID-19 is a byproduct of modernization and poses unique risks for the society. The country adopted strict measures to curb the spread of the virus, risk of transmission; increasing the risk of other problems including child marriage. The deadliest disease that was first detected in Wuhan City of Hubei Province in China on 31 December 2019 (WHO, 2020) has significantly endangered every aspect of human life across the globe. In Bangladesh, the first three known cases were reported on 8 March 2020 by the country's Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR). Like other countries, Bangladesh adopted strict restriction measures to

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control the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Public and private offices were declared closed. Restriction on physical movement was continued from March 26 to May 2020. Government imposed lockdowns from March to April, 2020 and March to August, 2021 all over the country. Educational institutions were closed near about 18 months from March 17 to September 12 (UNICEF, 2021; Billah, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, various societal problems intensified, among which child marriage emerged as an alarming concern (Hossain et al., 2021)

According to the law of Bangladesh, a marriage before 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys except special circumstances, is unlawful and recognized as child marriage. Though Bangladesh has the fourth highest prevalence of child marriage in the world, the subsequent governments tried to curb the rising trends of the incidents (UNICEF, 2021). As a result, before the pandemic Bangladesh secured a notable progress in curbing the child marriage. But in early 2020, the prevalence of child marriage, unintended pregnancies, and gender-based violence have increased significantly. According to a survey, conducted by the gender justice and diversity department of BRAC, over 60% of families in Bangladesh practiced child marriage (BRAC, 2023). The condition was worsened during COVID-19 pandemic. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund estimated that at least 10 million additional girls were at risk of being forced into marriage due to the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2021). Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) reported that at least 13,886 girls in 21 districts were victims of child marriages between April and October of 2020.

Though the evidence of child marriage among girls is a well-known issue in Bangladesh, boys also faced this problem as well during this pandemic. So, we tried to explore the prevalence of child marriage among boys and the factors associated with the incident. The loss of income of parents and school closures during the COVID-19 were the main reasons behind the increase of child marriages (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). School closures, job losses and increased economic insecurity, parental deaths due to the pandemic were some other reasons behind girls' vulnerabilities at increased risk of child marriage. To Hossain et al., (2021), exacerbated financial crisis, the prolonged shutdown of educational institutions and social insecurities were the principal triggering factors for such a high pace of child marriages. Likewise, School closure, economic stress, service disruptions, parental deaths due to the pandemic are putting the most vulnerable girls at risk of child marriage (UNICEF, 2021).

Child marriage causes serious socio-economic, physical, and psychological problems to the underage brides and grooms and their parents in Bangladesh. Consequences like, school dropouts, forced sexual relations, early pregnancy, and adverse physical and mental health effects were documented by Afrin et al. (2021). Again, the victims of child marriage have high chances to experience domestic violence, dropout of schooling, unplanned pregnancy, and maternal mortality and problems (Paul, 2021). Girls, who face child marriage, suffer from depression, anxiety, emotional blackmail, physical and psychical problems arose from sexual relations, household responsibilities etc. (Meem & Yasmin, 2022). In a nutshell, the increased rate of child marriage during COVID-19 impeded the global goal of ending child marriage by 2030. It jeopardized the dreams of our future generation as well as the wellbeing of the country. In this backdrop, the present study aimed to explore how COVID-19 affected the prevalence of child marriage in a rural area of Bangladesh and to suggest how to reduce the increasing nature of child marriage.

2. Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to determine the prevalence of child marriage during COVID-19 as well as to understand how COVID-19 promoted child marriage during pandemic.

The specific objectives were to:

1. Analyze the prevalence and trends of child marriages during COVID-19
2. Assess the changes of prevalence of child marriage due to COVID-19
3. Investigate the causes of child marriages during COVID-19

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Ulrich Beck's risk society

This study adopted the notion of Ulrich Beck's risk society as it fit perfectly on the pandemic of COVID-19 and its effect on a socio-demographic issues like child marriage. To Beck, due to modernization and modernity the world turns into a risk society. Beck (1996) has acclaimed that modern society creates problems instead of solving them. According to Beck's notion, modernization itself as risk; modernization creates risks. In modern society higher and higher levels of hazards becoming the norm (Beck, 1996). From this view, it can be said that risk creates another type of risk. The risk society, he argues, is not limited to environmental and health risks alone, it includes a whole series of interrelated changes within contemporary social life such as shifting employment patterns, heightened job insecurity, declining influence of tradition and custom, erosion of traditional family patterns and democratization of personal relations.

We know that the COVID-19 has spread all over the world through the modern communication and transportation technology, most specifically global travelling and has created many kinds of risks and challenges as well. The outbreak of COVID-19 has compelled the whole world to adopt the unique measure; lockdown caused joblessness, poverty, food insecurity, social insecurity, school closure, school dropout etc. COVID-19 negatively impacts on economy, education, family relations and many other aspects of everyday life. From this perspective, COVID-19 is a risk of modernization that has indirectly escalated child marriage. For this reason, Beck's theory has been applied for the analysis of child marriage amid COVID-19 situation.

3.2 Jurgen Habermas' system crisis

Jürgen Habermas, a critical theorist, builds his social theory around the tension between the lifeworld and system. In his Theory of Communicative Action (1984), Habermas conceptualizes the lifeworld as the sphere of shared meanings, personal relationships, cultural traditions, and social integration, while the system is composed of institutions that function according to instrumental rationality, such as the economy, law, and state bureaucracy. Crises arise when the system encroaches upon the lifeworld, undermining social cohesion and communication within communities and creating alienation (Habermas, 1984).

To Habermas, education is a key institution within the lifeworld that fosters communicative action- where individuals, particularly children, develop a sense of agency and learn social norms (Habermas, 1984). Alongside, a system crisis occurs when instrumental rationality, which governs the economic and administrative spheres, starts to dominate areas of life that should be governed by communicative rationality- mutual understanding and consensus within families and communities. A vital element of Habermas's system crisis is the idea of a legitimation crisis, where the state loses its authority and the trust of its citizens due to its failure to provide basic

protections (Habermas, 1973). Again, he (1987) warns against the unchecked expansion of systemic logic, as it undermines the potential for rational discourse in the lifeworld.

The increase in child marriage during COVID-19 is a striking example of the system crisis described by Habermas. The pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities by allowing the logic of economic survival to overpower social protections, disrupt educational systems, and expose the weaknesses of governance and legal systems. From perspective of Habermas, the pandemic intensified the colonization of the lifeworld by systemic imperatives, leading to the erosion of children's rights and the failure of communication, dialogue, and protection within communities.

4. Methodology of the Study

4.1 Study design

As a part of mix method, both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques and presentation approaches were used due to our interest on why child marriage greatly increased among COVID-19 period and its prevalence. Quantitative method helped to identify the approximate number of child marriage among research areas and to compare it with child marriage data obtained in previous years. For qualitative study, narrative approach was utilized. Narrative approach consists of the procedures to analyze data from storytelling. Data was collected through participant's stories or experiences (Cresswell, 2016).

4.2 Participants, sampling, and recruitment

The study covered two Upazilas of Jashore district, Bangladesh; two union parishads from each of the Upazilas. The specification criteria were set out when selecting the respondents: a) married off under 18 years of age for girls, and 21 years of age for boys during covid-19 pandemic, b) resident of study area c) being both girl and boy. Keeping mind these criteria, respondents were selected purposively. Data were collected from 85 respondents from them 69 were girls whereas 16 were boys who were the victims of child marriage during pandemic. Again, using purposive sampling, five (Four girls and a boy) in-depth interviews were conducted. To know the guardian and expert opinions, six Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted for qualitative data as well. We included, parents, marriage register, school teachers, union parishad chairman, doctor, and religious leader one from each group respectively as Key Informants. Their valuable opinion enriched and validated this article as well.

4.3 Data collection

The data were collected in the home settings of the respondents by the researchers during the period of 11 august 2022 to November 2022; each interview lasted around 35 minutes. For quantitative data collection, we used a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interview guideline for in-depth interviews and key informant interviews (KII). The review of literature was enhanced for secondary data sources. By acquiring extremely authentic data from field work, we completed our highly analytical study with ensuring the reliability and validity of data. The main way we followed to ensure validity and reliability was triangulation of data. However, the sample of this study was limited to four union parishads of Jashore district only.

4.4 Data analysis

To analyze quantitative data, IBM SPSS Statistics 25 was brought to bear upon. After getting data from this software, descriptive statistics was used to present numerical data. Narrative approach was administered for this study. This approach has for different types to collect data (Cresswell,

2016). Among them biographical study was conducted. Biographical study consists of collecting life experiences of an individual. For presentation of qualitative data, narratives analysis was used.

4.5 Ethical considerations

In this study, participants' pseudonyms were used in data presentation to ensure confidentiality of our respondents. Written consent was obtained from the participants for ensuring their interest to participate in this study and to publish data. Since there was no ethics approval board at our institution at the time of conducting this study, no ethics approval was obtained. However, all ethics that should be followed in research were followed properly. We ensured the participants that no personal information would be disclosed that would identify them. We also assured them that their dignity would not be affected.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

The study ended with the participation of 69 under-married girls and 16 under-married boys whose socio-demographic characteristics are presented in table-1. The collected data were analyzed in tabular form with simple percentage for easy understanding.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

Variables		Male: N=16		Female: N=69		
Age	Category	No. of respondents	Percentage	Category	Number of respondents	Percentage
	11-13	0	0	11-13	04	5.80
	14-16	02	12.50	14-16	29	42.03
	17-19	10	62.50	17-19	36	52.17
	20-22	04	25	20-22	0	0
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100
Education	No education	00	00	No education	10	14.49
	primary	03	18.75	primary	35	50.72
	secondary	07	43.75	secondary	16	23.19
	SSC	03	18.75	SSC	08	11.59
	HSC	02	12.50	HSC	00	00
	Under Graduation	01	6.25		00	00
	Total	16		Total	69	100
Fathers' Occupation	Farmer	06	37.5	Farmer	37	53.62
	Laborer	03	18.75	Laborer	22	31.88
	Businessman	03	18.75	Businessman	4	5.80
	Teacher	00	00	Teacher	1	1.45
	Living abroad	02	12.50	Leaving abroad	4	5.80
	Driver	02	12.50	Driver	1	1.45
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100

Variables	Male: N=16			Female: N=69		
	Category	No. of respondents	Percentage	Category	Number of respondents	Percentage
Income of the family	0-4000	2	12.50	0-4000	3	4.35
	5000-7000	8	50	5000-7000	43	62.32
	8000-10000	4	25	8000-10000	12	17.39
	Above 10000	2	12.50	Above 10000	11	15.94
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100
No. of family members	3-4	08	50	3-4	10	14.49
	5-6	03	18.75	5-6	28	40.58
	7-8	05	31.25	7-8	31	44.93
	Above 9	00	00	Above 9	00	00
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100

Source: Field study, 2022

5.2 Prevalence of child marriage

During the COVID-19 pandemic, child marriage increased across the world, including in Bangladesh (The Prothom Alo, 2022; Antara, 2021; Billah, 2021). Indeed, our study area Jashore district was not exceptional in this regard. The principal aim of our study was to find out the prevalence of child marriage during COVID-19 period. It was assessed by comparing the prevalence of child marriage during the COVID-19 period with the non-COVID period. For this, we attempted to compare the number of child marriages with that of the non-COVID-19 period. The data shown in Table-2 were collected from informal sources such as elderly persons in the community, Imams (religious leaders), community leaders, and school teachers who were aware of and present during the occurrence of child marriages. It is worth mentioning that in most cases, the age of the bride and groom was reported as higher than their actual age when the marriage was registered. Therefore, it was very difficult to determine the actual age of both the bride and the groom. Many of the nuptial ceremonies were believed to have taken place behind closed doors or without being officially documented. However, due to our sincere efforts and with the help of local people, we managed to collect the total number of child marriages in the study area. The following table demonstrated the increasing trend in the prevalence of child marriage.

Table 02: Prevalence of child marriage pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 period in the study areas

Name of Villages	Frequency			Percentage		
	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021
Village-01	06	10	06	27.27	45.46	27.27
Village-02	08	13	15	22.22	36.11	41.67
Village-03	03	05	12	15	25	60
Village-04	06	09	15	20	30	50
Total	23	37	48	21.30	34.26	44.44

Source: Field study, 2022

N. B. 2019= before COVID-19, 2020 & 2021= During COVID-19

The above table indicated that the COVID -19 caused a sharp and steady rise in child marriage. The finding demonstrated that in 2019 the number was 23, in 2020 it reached 37 and in 2021 at 48. It specified a clear increasing trends of child marriage during the pandemic.

5.3 Information of respondents' marriage

Though it sounds odd as child marriage related information, it is true that information of child marriage is something different from normal marriage. From this thinking, we ordained some questions to identify whether information of child marriage is different or not. The following table shows about the thinking.

Table 3: Marriage related information of the respondents

Name of the variables	Male			Female		
	Category	Number of respondents	Percentage	Category	Number of respondents	Percentage
Actual Age of first marriage	16-17	04	25	9-11	05	7.25
	18-19	05	31.25	12-14	31	44.93
	20	07	43.75	15-17	33	47.82
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100
Marriage Registration	Yes	07	43.75	Yes	12	17.39
	No	08	50	No	25	36.23
	No response	01	6.25	No response	32	46.38
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100
Age shown while registration	21 years	06	85.71	18 Years	09	75
	22 years	01	14.29	19 Years	03	25
	Total	07	100	Total	12	100
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100
Types of arranging marriage	Forced arranged marriage	03	18.75	Forced arranged marriage	28	40.58
	Consensual arranged marriage	05	31.25	Consensual arranged marriage	31	44.93
	Autonomous/self-choice marriage	08	50	Autonomous/self-choice marriage	10	14.49
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100
Knowledge about the legal age of marriage	Yes	10	62.50	Yes	12	17.39
	No	06	37.50	No	32	46.38
	No response	00	00	No response	25	36.23
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100
Take consent before arranging marriage	Yes	10	62.50	Yes	12	17.39
	No	06	37.50	No	32	46.38
	No response	00	00	No response	25	35.23
	Total	16	100	Total	69	100
Who take decision to make the marriage	Father & male members	9	56.25	Father & male members	42	60.87
	Mother	0	00	Mother	4	5.80
	Self	2	12.50	Self	0	00
	Jointly both the parents	4	25	Jointly both the parents	18	26.08
	Community leader	0	00	Community leader	2	2.90
	Religious leader	1	6.25	Religious leader	3	4.35
Total	16	100	Total	69	100	

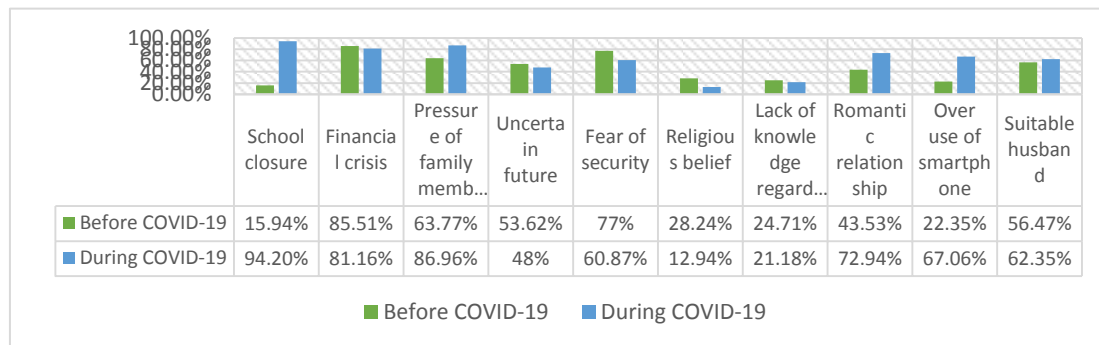
Source: Field study, 2022

The above table demonstrated that most marriage in our study areas remained unregistered. Official age of marriage was shown higher than the actual age. In line with this findings, Abdus Salam (65), marriage register by profession, told: “As far as I know there is no written evidence of child marriage in our area. By making false documents, the age of the victims of child marriage has been shown as per legal age.” Alongside, Yaqoob Munshi (67), a religious leader, told: “Naturally I am invited to offer doa in marriage ceremony and nothing to do beyond the decision of the parents and local leaders.” In relation to the consent of the bride and grooms, it was found that most of the cases consent had not sought before arranging marriage. Rahima Begum (16), a girl who was a victim of child marriage, told: “My father did not seek consent from me. It is unbelievable that my father seeks consent from children before marriage arrangement in our family.”

5.4 COVID-19 and child marriage for girls

Other than the prevalence of child marriage during pandemic, we also aimed to assess how COVID-19 promoted child marriage in that situation. Before the COVID-19 period, in Bangladesh, the child marriage reduced nationally over the decade of 2007-2017, from 66% to 59%. But according to survey report of UNFPA, (2021) during pandemic, child marriage increased 13%. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data indicated that COVID-19 worked as factor behind closure of school, financial crisis, social insecurity, over use of smartphone, making romantic relationship which eventually pushed children to child marriage. Besides, religious belief, lack of knowledge regarding legal age of marriage, availability of ‘suitable husband,’ and low demand of dowry were also responsible for the child marriage during the pandemic. The following chart depicted the factors of child marriage for girls during the pandemic:

Figure 1: Factors of Child Marriage for Girls in COVID-19 Situation



Source: Field study, 2022 *Multiple response

The above figure shows that closure of school during the pandemic situation was the prime factors of early marriage in the study area. Due to school closure girls were staying at home and nothing to do except some household chores. About 94% of the respondents reported that because of COVID-19, they were forced to get married as their parents found it as an alternative solution. Rita (15) told:

Though our financial condition was sound; due to the closure of my school, my father as well as other relatives pressurized me to get married. They thought that it is uncertain when the pandemic will be end. My age is getting up. So, it is high time to marry off.

Most of the respondents (85.5%) reported that they had to face early marriage during COVID-19 due to the financial crisis of their parents. Parents arranged child marriage in the expectation of reducing the financial burden. Sometimes parents thought how to avoid spending on daughters' education and found marry off daughter as easy solution. Abul Hakim (56), father of a victim of child marriage narrated: "Due to COVID-19 all my income sources were closed, it was very difficult for me to maintain my family. To reduce family expenses, I opted to marry off my daughter, who was 14 years of old." Again, our study revealed that social and cultural pressure from relatives and neighbors influence child marriage during pandemic (87%). Parents felt pressure from neighbors as well as relatives to make child marriage of their younger girls. Rumana Akhter (15) reported: "My relatives and neighbors made my parents believe that all the sins done by me before marriage will fell on my parents. So, it is better to marry off the me as early as possible."

However, only 12% claimed that religious belief responsible for their early marriage. In addition, uncertain future, and lower demand of dowry for young bride was another cause of child marriage during COVID-19 (48%). Parents made it belief that for the younger girls they might pay lower amount of dowry. In this regard, Shahana (14) told: "My father choses a man aged 35, who lives in middle east for me as he did not demand dowry from my family."

Again, we found that social insecurity promoted early marriage in our study areas (61%). Zohorul Islam (56), a Union Parishad Chairman, stated that "Frustration, financial crisis and fear of social security of the families are the issues behind the rise of child marriage during covid-19 period in his area." In the same manner, Shohel Mahmud (57), doctor of a upazila health complex, told that "Marrying off daughter is considered as a solution of uncertain circumstances like, concern about safety, poverty, dowry etc."

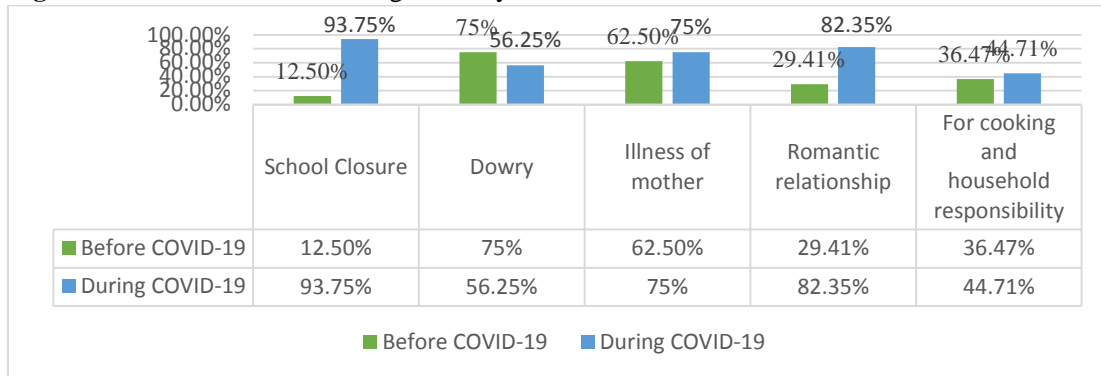
Due to lock down physical distance was maintained, educational activities became online based. Parents compelled to provide smartphone to their children. Smartphone in the hand of underage population put a serios effect on romantic relationships which ended up with early marriage (67%). Pursuit of a 'suitable husband' was another cause of increasing child marriage (62%). One of the KII, Abdus Salam (65), opined that "When parents find a potential groom who could ensure financial security during the pandemic induced crisis, then they agree to marry off their daughter right away."

5.5 COVID-19 and child marriage for boys

It is a common belief that child marriage is an issue of child girls. Though limited compare to bride, child marriage for boys is equally harmful for the child groom as well as for the society. The causes and consequences of child marriage for girls is a focused topic both in academia and to policy makers; least one is found for the boys. Observing this lacking, we explored the issues of child marriage among boys during pandemic. The following figure provided the contributing factors related to child marriage among boys during the pandemic.

The above chart demonstrated that like girls, closure of school was the prime cause of escalating child marriage among boys during the pandemic (94%). Additionally, dowry, the alternative earning source of money was another cause of increasing child marriage for boys (56%). For boys, marriage is considered as a means of making money and materials. Parents of boys often marry off their sons in early age because of receiving dowry. One of the KIIs, Shohel Mahmud (57), opined as: "Most of the cases parents of groom demand cash as dowry. Sometimes this money is used for getting job for the groom or starting business or marry off their own daughter."

Figure 2: Factors of Child Marriage for Boys in COVID-19 Situation



Source: Field study, 2022 *Multiple response

In our study, illness or death of mother was found as one of the major factors behind child marriage for boys (75%). To take care of mother as well as elderly person in the family, bearing the responsibility of household chores such as cooking, processing, and pounding new crops, tending livestock under aged boys were forced to marry. Similarly, romantic relationship with girls leads to early marriage for boys (82%). Rakib (16) reported in the following way: “I was having a relationship with a girl in my village. Hearing this, her parents tried to marry her forcefully. Then we got married secretly.” In Some cases, parents also arranged child marriage for sons in fear of getting their sons engage in any uneven romantic relationship. However, most of the boys married in childhood out of compulsion and unawareness.

6. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting long-term lockdown have had a profound impact on child marriage in Bangladesh. To limit the spread out of the virus, like other countries, the government-imposed lockdown created an unusual situation in Bangladesh. All school-based academics activities were closed, physical movements were restricted, face to face contracts were postponed. An unfamiliar scenario was being experienced by people. Along with various outcomes, prolong closure of school and unstable financial condition of the parents made girls vulnerable to be a child bride. Not only for girls, this pandemic placed child marriage for boys also.

This study aimed to assess the prevalence of early marriage in Bangladesh during COVID-19 pandemic and to investigate how the pandemic escalated the prevalence of child marriage. The findings shows that the prevalence of child marriage increased during the pandemic period compare to non-pandemic period (Table-2). Our finding is consistent with the national data [Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics-2023 (BSVS-2023)] which reported that at least 40.9% of women were found to have been married before turning 18, in 2021 the number was 32.4% and in 2020, it was 31.3% in 2019. According to a report, BRAC prevented 670 child marriages in 2019 and 1,091 in 2020 through persuasion and education efforts. Meanwhile, there were 167 additional attempts at child marriage in 2019 and 292 in 2020. All of these indicates the rising trends of child marriage during COVID-19 situation. This result confirms previous similar studies (Meem and Yasmin 2020; Afrin and Zainuddin, 2021; UNICEF, 2021; MNF, 2020; Hossain et al., 2021; Bidisha et al., 2023). In contrast to our finding, UNFPA (2022), reported that at the time

of pandemic, marriage among 15-19 years of girls in Bangladesh was low (26.9%). In global perspective, our study is supported by the studies of Paul and Mondal, 2020; Thangaperumal, et al., 2022; and Liem, et al., 2023, where they documented the higher rate of child marriage during COVID-19.

Our study findings reveal that most marriage in our study areas remained unregistered (Table-3). While some were registered, they were full of false information. In that case, by raising the actual age marriage registration was made. This finding is supported by the UNICEF, where it stated that as most births in Bangladesh have gone unregistered, the official age of many Bangladesh women and girls at the time of marriage has been unknown. Similarly, according to Human Rights Watch (2012), the marriage registration system in Bangladesh remains unreliable, in part due to the fact that legal mandates for marriage registration are not required for all religious communities. In our study areas, father is the chief decision maker of arranging marriage (Table-3). This finding is in line with the findings of (Meem and Yasmin (2020).

Our study reveals the causes of elevating child marriage during the pandemic. In line with the previous studies (Patoari, 2020; Mahtab and Fariha, 2022; Wahab, 2022; Meem and Yasmin, 2020; Hossain et al., 2021; UNFPA, 2022; Afrin and Zainuddin, 2021) our study documents that poverty, social insecurity, shirking of income generating opportunity, dowry, romantic relationship, religious belief, lack of knowledge regarding legal age are the mention worthy reasons of escalating child marriage during the pandemic (Figure 1&2). However, closure of educational institution is cited as the most leading cause of elevating child marriage during COVID-19 (Figure 1&2). Closure of school forced to restrain at home, educational stoppage and finally leads to child marriage. The findings of our study are corroborated with the national findings of Hossain et al., (2021) and Wahab (2022). This phenomenon is also common in international context, where Yoosefi et al., (2023) reported that in Iran, child marriage increased during COVID-19 due to closure of educational institute. This scenario is also observed in Indonesia (Liem et al., 2023) and India (Paul and Mondal, 2020; Thangaperumal, et al., 2022.)

By applying Beck's theory of risk society, we have explored the risk factors of increasing child marriage during COVID-19. In this regard we have linked between COVID-19 and child marriage. COVID-19 is a byproduct of modernization and poses unique risks for the society. The country adopted strict measures to curb the spread of the virus, risk of transmission, but increasing the risk or other problems including child marriage. Child marriage became an adjustment mechanism in addressing the various societal and familial risks during the pandemic. In the same manner, Habermas' system crisis is compatible with the rise of child marriage during COVID-19 as it mentions about how economic, political, and social system make exploitation on lifeworld, where social norms and concerns for children reside. During COVID-19, institutional cessations such as school closures and economic adversities pushed parents to adopt survival measures, like child marriage, driven by instrumental rationality. This reflects the colonization of the lifeworld by the system, where economic pressures, school closure etcetera override social norms, resulting in a crisis that disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, particularly young boys, and girls.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study outlines a concerning rise of child marriage during COVID-19 after assessing previous non-pandemic years. Naturally the practice of child marriage was knowingly high and common in our study area. The COVID-19 further aggravated this social menace significantly. This surge

was influenced by several factors, including school closures, economic complexities, and weekend legal protection systems etc. Significantly, we found closure of schools, a key safe space for children, as one of the primary drivers of increasing child marriage rates. Many children, especially girls, were left exposed to early marriages without the protective environment of schools. These weddings were sometimes the result of financial difficulties or societal pressures made worse by the epidemic. In addition to exposing preexisting flaws in child protection systems, COVID-19 exacerbated them. As a coping mechanism in case of financial instability, families moved to child marriage from the thoughts of cost cutting. Despite the presence of legislative structures to reduce child marriage, this spike happened, indicating not only the need for stronger preventive tactics but also their implementation.

In this study, we have articulated some recommendations for policy implications and future research. Firstly, governments should carefully think about school closure issue in case of future pandemic or emergency situations. If closures of school seem necessary, alternative strategies must be implemented to ensure that children remain attached with learning. In this case, governments should reopen school as soon as the in-person schooling is safe for children. Secondly, though child marriage prohibiting laws are present in Bangladesh, enforcement of these laws is weak in many areas in Bangladesh. Governments must implement and enforce these laws strictly, especially rural areas where child marriage is frequent. Thirdly, awareness programs should be designed and implemented in rural areas to aware families and communities about legal issues and harmful consequences of early marriage. We think, it is possible through poster, keeping it within reading materials, organizing seminar, and workshop.

Fourthly, government must focus on universal birth and marriage registration to ensure exact age of children. It will help to verify the legal age of children and prosecute offenders. Fifthly, government should provide financial assistance and introduce social security programs to reduce child marriage as many guardians are forced due to economic constraints. Food security programs, cash transfers, and other forms of financial support can help alleviate the financial pressures that lead families to marry off their children. Finally, government should make a coordination among various governmental and non-governmental sectors including education, law enforcement, health, planning, and social welfare.

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