

Understanding the nature of child marriage in urban slums in Bangladesh: A mixed method investigation of two slums in Dhaka and Chittagong

BACKGROUND

Child marriage is an internationally recognized human rights violation and represents a serious threat to the public health and development of Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh has adopted several policy changes to address the problem of child marriage, these measures have not been sufficient to significantly reduce the scope of the problem.

Despite the prevalence and severity of the problem, few studies have attempted to explore the causes and consequences of child marriage in the context of urban slums. As the population of urban slums continues to swell in Dhaka, the social issues these communities face, including child marriage, will likely become more severe.

Although several interventions have been implemented with the aim of reducing the prevalence of child marriage in these communities, few have been evaluated and little is known about whether these interventions are able to generate any real change, nor how they are perceived from the perspective of participants, community members and key stakeholders.

The results of this study are expected to generate evidence-based communication messages and solutions for government, program implementers, donors and other stakeholders to promote more informed and effective interventions, and ultimately support the national goal of ending child marriage.

KEY OBJECTIVES

1. What are the underlying issues and characteristics that shape decisions surrounding ECM in the context of urban slums from the perspective of communities living in urban slums?
2. In what ways does ECM change the lives of adolescent girls, including their social, educational and economic circumstances, health and mental wellbeing, and sexual choices and rights in urban poor communities?
3. What are the underlying issues and characteristics that contribute to delayed marriage? (i.e. a young woman not marrying until they are 18 years or older?)
4. What successes, challenges and lessons can be learned from existing interventions that address ECM in urban slum settlements? Initially focusing on the activities of BLAST¹ and BRAC².

¹Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust is Bangladesh's premier legal aid organization, serving disadvantaged clients in over 57,000 cases.

² BRAC is the world's largest NGO, reaching 135 million people worldwide and working in 64 districts throughout the country.

METHODOLOGY

Study sites: Bhashantek slum in Dhaka and Shantinagar slum in Chittagong

Duration: October 2015-october 2018

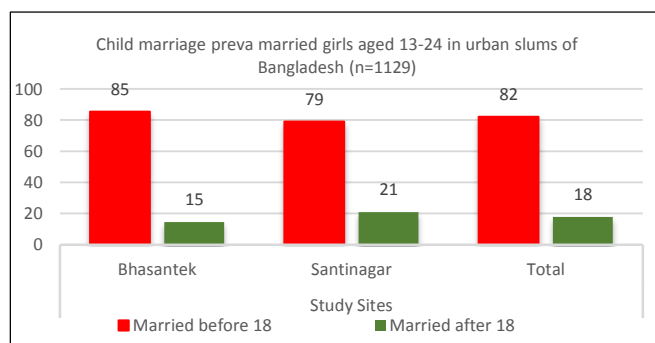
Quantitative: Survey among 2,136 married-unmarried adolescent girls and young women (13-24 years).

Qualitative: 98 In-depth Interviews & 13 Focus Group Discussions with adolescent girls and young women, adolescent boy and young males (13-24 years), parents; 11 Key Informant Interviews with community influential people; 22 key persons including policy makers (govt. and non govt.), practitioners, researchers, journalists, lawyers and activists from 11 organizations



KEY FINDINGS

- About 82% got married before the age of 18 and median age at marriage was 16 years
- In Bhashantek, the prevalence of early marriage was 85%, whereas in Shantinagar, it was 79%
- About 43% of them got married by the age of 15



A. Reasons of early and child marriage

Poverty

- Drop-out of school
- Parents readily accept 'good' proposal
- Way out for girls from broken families

Social Insecurity

- Pervasive violence, crimes, sexual harassment
- Fear of losing girl's and family's honor
- Increasing prevalence of elopement as a result of love relationships among adolescents

Social & Gender Norms

- Higher dowry for older girls
- Less emphasis on girl's education
- Girls are considered mature for marriage at puberty
- Husband's guardianship to protect against sexual violence

B. Reasons of Delayed marriage

- Poverty and unavoidable financial choices to look after respective families
- Higher dowry was a demand for
- Positive family support (financial and ideological) let some girls pursue education
- Choice to support their own future wedding plans

C. Reasons of early marriage among boys

- Having income: Perception of adulthood, manhood and readiness of marriage
- Desire for family formation, building kinship and expansion of social networks
- Fulfillment of sexual desire
- To ensure fruitful endings to romantic relationships
- Parental interference and influence: marriage as a disciplinary act

OUTPUTS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

1. Evidence on ECM and dowry practices in urban slums from the community perspective, which will inform communication messages and possible solutions for key stakeholders, program practitioners and lawyers, researchers, government officials, activists and community
2. Needs Assessment with key stakeholders, program practitioners and lawyers, researchers, government officials, activists and community to identify key areas for further research (where feasible and relevant)
3. Series of formal and consultation meetings with national and local stakeholders including policy actors, gate keepers, and local community leaders
4. Policy dialogues with policymakers and relevant stakeholders: NGOs, human rights lawyers (BLAST, ASK, HRLE at BRAC), government and other relevant stakeholders
5. Engagement in strategic partnerships to inform activities and approaches to address early marriage and related issues in urban slums
6. Develop toolkits, factsheets, communication messages and other forms of dissemination to create awareness around these issues

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