



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Early Marriage, Secondary Schooling, and the Opportunities and Choices of Rural Bangladeshi Women

Research Objective: The lives of women in rural Bangladesh has changed substantially during the past three decades. Fertility and child mortality have declined, and schooling has increased to achieve gender parity at both the primary and secondary level. Yet their life choices appear limited across a range of domains – including the timing of marriage and childbirth, secondary school dropout, and participation in formal employment -- which can have adverse effects on the next generation and the overall development of the country. To understand the root causes behind these issues as well as potential solutions, the University of Kent and the University of Malaya jointly undertook a three year study to investigate the life choices of rural Bangladeshi women, with funding from the Australian government's Development Research Award Scheme (ADRAS).

Research Methods: The study included a nationwide survey of over 7,500 women between the ages of 20 and 39 in rural and urban Bangladesh, with detailed information on their education, marriage, childbirth, employment, migration, social networks, as well as literacy, numeracy, cognitive skills and attitudes regarding traditional norms. In the second phase of the survey, 300 secondary schools attended by the first phase respondents were traced and information collected on the institutions and the teachers, with in-depth interviews conducted with school pupils, graduates and dropouts at 4 different sites. The data was analysed using multivariate regression techniques to examine causal relationships between marriage, purdah practice and schooling, among other factors shaping women's lives. The study also included detailed interviews with women to gain further insights underlying their life choices at two types of locations: (i) the regions around the capital Dhaka with a high concentration of manufacturing; (ii) the coastal belt in southern Bangladesh with a high risk of climate change shocks.

Key Research Findings: Traditional norms, which prescribe a gender-based division of labour between households and limit the mobility of women, outside of the home continues to be a major factor in shaping women's life choices.

- Early marriage is, currently, the key reason for secondary school drop-out among adolescent girls in Bangladesh. Although parents invest equally in the education of their sons and daughters in primary school, they spend substantially less on the education of their daughters when they reach secondary school (27% less than on their sons), in anticipation of their early marriage.¹

¹ Asadullah and Wahhaj (2016). "Marriage Instead of Graduation", D+C Monthly e-Paper, August 2016.

- In the patriarchal setting of rural Bangladesh, adolescent girls who do not marry at an early age may be viewed with suspicion by families seeking brides (e.g. perceived as being more likely to be promiscuous), which causes dowry prices to rise with marriage age, and pressure parents to marry off their daughters early. Large-scale improved access to secondary schooling can dissipate these beliefs but, paradoxically, a decline in fertility can make them worse. This may account for the persistence of early female marriage in Bangladesh and the demand for higher dowry from older brides in spite of steady progress in other domains.²
- The rise of female employment in the manufacturing sector in Bangladesh during the last two decade provides adolescent girls with an alternative to early marriage. However, it has also led to an increase in female child labour. We estimate that girls between 10 and 13 account for 3% of the workforce in the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh, girls between 14 and 17 account for a further 11%. This is causing a male-biased gender gap in schooling to reappear in the manufacturing belt in Bangladesh contrary to the trends in other urban areas and rural parts of Bangladesh.³
- In spite of the growth in female employment in the manufacturing sector, overall paid work participation among women in Bangladesh remains extremely low, at 3% compared to 18% for men (A further 38% of women and 49% of men are engaged in unpaid work). Traditional norms regarding female mobility and employment can account for nearly half of the gender gap in paid work participation.⁴
- Women who experienced early marriage have beliefs and attitudes more aligned with traditional gender norms. About one-third of this effect is due to the fact that women who marry early also have lower schooling and worse social networks, but the remaining two-thirds of the effect is due to the experience of early marriage itself.⁵ Thus, the practice of early marriage is contributing to the persistence of traditional gender norms in Bangladesh, which in turn is perpetuating this practice.
- Women in Bangladesh have limited agency in their marriage decisions. In most cases, parents arrange marriages, choosing the marriage partner as well as the timing of marriage. Women who initiate their own marriage tend to marry later, delay childbirth, stay in school longer. Therefore, programmes and policies aimed at improving the agency of adolescent girls to make their own marriage decisions should lead to wider benefits, including delayed marriage, increased schooling of girls and shift away from traditional gender norms.⁶

² Wahhaj (2015). "A Theory of Child Marriage". University of Kent Economics Discussion Paper Series.

³ Asadullah and Wahhaj (2016). "Minimum Wage Attracts Girls to Factories". D+C Monthly e-Paper, January 2016.

⁴ Asadullah and Wahhaj (2016). "Missing from the Market: Purdah Norms and Women's Paid Work Participation in Bangladesh". Mimeo, University of Malaya, Faculty of Economics.

⁵ Asadullah and Wahhaj (2016). "Early Marriage, Social Networks and the Transmission of Norms". University of Kent Economics Discussion Paper Series.

⁶ Asadullah and Wahhaj (2016). "Child Marriage Law and Freedom of Choice in Bangladesh". Economic and Political Weekly. January 2016.