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Factors affecting early marriage and early conception of women: A case of slum areas in Rajshahi City, Bangladesh

Sarker Obaida Nasrin and K. M. Mustafizur Rahman*

Department of Population Science and Human Resource Development, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi-6205, Bangladesh.

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Early marriage and early conception is a nascent matter across the world and remains widespread problem particularly in developing countries including Bangladesh. In this study, an attempt was made to analyze comprehensively early marriage and conception of women based on findings of interviews conducted with 609 ever-married women from five slum areas under Rajshahi city, Bangladesh. The present study has tried to delineate these issues across different socio-economic conditions of the respondents. The study also revealed that education, family's monthly income, religion are the most influential factors in determining the likelihood of early age at marriage and conception as well. Our intention has tried to raise awareness of the situation and, where necessary, to stimulate action. Findings need to be scientifically utilized in developing suitable programs addressing the case of early marriage and early conception particularly in slum areas and country as a whole.

Key words: Early marriage, early conception, slum areas, cross tabulation and logistic regression analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, marriage is regarded as a moment of celebration and a milestone in adult life. Actually, marriage is a universal social institution (UN, 1990) through which an adult male and an adult female generally involves in marriage relationship and acquires new social status as a husband and wife. But, such an important social institution brings some numerous problem to a couple especially women, when it happens at an early age. Early marriage which is also referred to as child marriage is common all over the globe and has inflicted dangerous and devastating effects on young children (especially females) who are completed to tie the knot in most cases. While the age at marriage is generally on the rise, early marriage-marriage of children and adolescents below the age of 18 is still widely practiced (UNICEF, 2001). Early marriage of female children is rampant in Bangladesh, especially in slum

areas, where there is a noticeable lack of back infrastructure, services and basic shelter. Those areas are characterized by substandard housing and squalor and lacking in tenure security. For female, the problem of early marriage is acute not only in slum areas but throughout the country as well. State's legal provision on minimum age at first marriage in Bangladesh generally is 18 years for female to access in marriage relationship. The average age at first marriage for female in Bangladesh is 18.7 years (BBS, 2009).

Early marriage is more frequent for female than their male counterparts. In rural Bangladesh there are many social pressures to marry of pubescent girls (Aziz and Maloney, 1985). If the marriage of a pubescent girl is delayed, her parents and sometimes the girl herself are made to feel guilty. Similar scenarios are more common in slum areas. Poverty is one of the major factors underpinning early marriages. Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and parents looking for early marriage of their daughters as an alternative way of reducing the burden. Bangladesh is a

*Corresponding author. E-mail: nishan_hrd@yahoo.com.

developing country where industrialization starts to begin in the recent year. When industrialization takes place, the urbanization starts. The growth of cities has always been accompanied by the growth of slums, where a huge number of people live. Deteriorating socio-economic conditions of slum dwellers is a major cause of unstable and fragile life of the women living there. Early marriage also has implications for the well-being of families, and for society as a whole. It extends a women's potential childbearing capacity, which itself represents a risk to mother (Arjun et al., 1991). Late marriage always cut the reproductive span of a woman and when marriage has occurred at an earlier age then she has more time to produce birth throughout her reproductive life span. Under these circumstances, early marriage may bring some physical and mental complexities to the mothers.

Progress made by Bangladesh regarding this issue, especially those factors that are related to early marriage and sequentially early conception has extremely slow. However, no systematic effort till date has been strongly undertaken by civil society organizations (CSOs) and public or private organizations as well. Thus, this study is making a humble effort to make an assessment regarding early marriage and early conception, so that, it can have a clear image of the current situation of the regarding matters in slum areas in Rajshahi city, Bangladesh.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on the data collected from five slum areas (Dorikhorbona, Ambagan, Sopura, Mirzapur and Budhpara) in Rajshahi city by using purposive sampling for the easy assess of the interviewer (one of the two authors). Before that, we made a pilot survey to identify those five areas at which most of the ever-married women are living. Then in each slum area, 125 ever-married women's data were collected by face to face interview method. Due to incompleteness, 16 data were removed from the total 625 data. Thus, we got 609 ever-married-women's information for this study. All the respondents were interviewed during November 6 to December 5, 2010. The data were edited, compiled, processed and analyzed by using SPSS 16.0 program.

We have performed univariate classification analysis that is, percentage distribution in order to observe the socio-economic and demographic conditions of the respondents. Also, bivariate classification analysis (cross-tabulation) is used to investigate the socio-economic correlates of early marriage and early conception. Finally, a multivariate technique named as logistic regression analysis is used for determining the impact of socio-economic factors on early marriage and early conception of the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Socio-economic backdrops of the respondents

We began with a brief overview of the study population with respect to several socio-economic characteristics (Table 1). Results indicate that, majority of the respondents (44.8%) are in age group 20 to 24 years, followed by the respondents at age group 15 to 19 years

(37.8%) and 25 years and above (14.1%). Still half of the female population (50.4%) is illiterate throughout the country (WMS, 2009). Among the study population, about four out of every ten respondents have no education. Respondents with primary education consists 29.9% followed by secondary education (27.8%). The percentage of the respondents having higher secondary and higher education is as low as 1.5. Education of parents especially father's education plays a vital role for the education of their children. It is observed that, 48.9% of the respondent's fathers have no education. About 33% and 18% fathers have primary and secondary education respectively. Fathers with higher secondary and higher education consists a negligible percentage of 0.8. In case of husband's education, 38.9% have secondary education followed by primary education (34.8%). The percentage of the husbands who are illiterate is as high as 19.9 and only 6.4% have higher secondary and higher education. It is commonly agreed that, the slum areas are largely dominated by poverty. It is observed from the family's monthly income information that, near about 50% of the respondents have their monthly family income less than BDT 4000 and remaining half have BDT 4000 and above. Most of the respondents are Muslim (95.4) and remaining 4.6% are non-Muslim.

Selected demographic characteristics of the respondents

There are some selected demographic characteristics of the respondents presented in Table 2. Parents may genuinely feel that their daughter will be better off and safer with a regular male guardian, that may resulted in the early marriage of their daughters which leads to early conception. A lion-share of the study respondents (83.7%) were married before their age 18 years of which three of every ten respondents married before 15 years of their age. Only 16.3% respondents were married at age 18 and above. These age groups (<15 years, 15 to 17 years and 18 + years) are chosen arbitrarily on the basis of the percentage of the respondent's early marriage and early conception as well. Early marriage extends a woman's reproduction span, thereby contributing to large family size, especially in the absence of contraception (Arjun et al., 1991). It is observed from Table 2 that, 47.9% women's age at first conception were 15 to 17 years and 10.3% women's age at first conception were less than 15 years. The percentage of women, whose age at first conception was 18 years and above was only 27.3. An interesting finding is that, majority of the mothers give birth to their first child in such an age when they are also considered as a child. Very few girls in early marriage in developing countries have access to contraception; nor would delayed pregnancy necessarily be acceptable to many husbands and in-laws (Barbara et al., 1998). Only 66% of the respondents used

Table 1. Selected socio-economic characteristics of the respondents.

Variables	Frequency (N = 609)	Percentage (100)
Respondent's age		
< 15 years	20	3.3
15-19 years	230	37.8
20-24 years	273	44.8
25+ years	86	14.1
Respondent's education		
No education	249	40.9
Primary	182	29.9
Secondary	169	27.8
Higher secondary and higher	9	1.5
Father's education		
No education	298	48.9
Primary	199	32.7
Secondary	107	17.6
Higher secondary and higher	5	0.8
Husband's education		
No education	121	19.9
Primary	212	34.8
Secondary	237	38.9
Higher secondary and higher	39	6.4
Family's monthly income (in BDT)		
< 2000	15	2.5
2000-2999	61	10.0
3000-3999	225	36.9
4000+	308	50.6
Religion		
Muslim	581	95.4
Non-Muslim	28	4.6

BDT= Bangladesh Currency- that is, Taka.

family planning method whereas, the percentage of those are not using family planning method was as high as 34. In case of husbands, near about eight of every ten were not using family planning method and only 22.2% were using this method (Table 2).

Socio-economic correlates of early marriage of women

Here, we began with the association between different age at first marriage and some selected socio-economic variables (Table 3). On the average, women with seven or more years of education marry four years later and 2.2

fewer children than those with no education (UNFPA, 1990). Quite similar results are observed from Table 3, where higher levels of respondent's education are significantly associated with the higher age at first marriage ($p = 0.000$). However, the precise nature of the interaction between education and marriage is not always evident. Father's education plays a vital role in the early marriage of their daughters. Many parents in traditional societies still believed that investment in a girl's education is wasted, when she is simply going to be married and work in another household. This concept is quite strong among illiterate fathers. Fathers with lower level of education have a higher tendency to the early marriage of their daughters and the association between different

Table 2. Selected demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Variables	Frequency (N = 609)	Percentage (100)
Age at first marriage		
<15	183	30.0
15-17	327	53.7
18+	99	16.3
Age at first conception		
No conception	88	14.4
< 15	63	10.3
15-17	292	47.9
18+	166	27.3
Use FP method by respondents		
Yes	402	66.0
No	207	34.0
Use FP method by husbands		
Yes	135	22.2
No	474	77.8

FP = Family planning.

levels of father’s education and the age at first marriage of their daughters are statistically significant ($p = 0.099$). Similar results also found incase of husband’s education of the respondents, where illiterate husband willingly marry a girl with an early age than those have different levels of higher education and the differences are statistically significant ($p = 0.000$). Poverty is considered one of the major factors underpinning early marriage, where family’s monthly income plays a critical role. The percentage of women, who are married at less than 15 years of their age, is decreased as their family’s monthly income increased (Table 3), and the differences are statistically significant ($p = 0.039$). The percentage of the respondents who are married at an early ages are much higher among the Muslim than their non-Muslim counterparts and the differences are statistically not significant ($p = 0.529$).

Socio-economic correlates of early conception of women

Table 4 demonstrates the association between early conception of women and different socio-economic variables. The risk of early pregnancy and child birth are well documented: increased risk of premature labour, complications during delivery, low birth-weight, and a higher chance that the newborn will not survive (Judith, 1995). Respondents with higher level of education are conceived at the higher age than those with lower level of education and the differences are statistically significant

($p = 0.000$). In poor setting male headed Bangladeshi society decision about conception of women largely depends on husband. Like the respondent’s education all of the categories of husband’s education have almost similar effect on age at first conception and the differences are also statistically significant ($P = 0.001$). Hence, education is regarded as being the prime catalyst in this process, because increase in educational attainment is significantly affect the age at first conception. The use rate of family planning method is not satisfactory from both respondents and husbands’ levels (Table 2). Use of family planning method is more or less likely to link with money. Furthermore, use of family planning method may be the extra economic burden for a couple, where family’s monthly income is quite low. It is evident from Table 4 that, as family’s monthly income level increase, the age at first conception also increased. In other words, respondents with lower family’s monthly income consists higher tendency of early conception and the differences are statistically significant ($p = 0.036$). Table 4 also shows that overall age at first conception of non-Muslim respondents is later than the Muslim respondents and the difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.375$).

Results of logistic regression analysis on early marriage

Logistic regression analysis technique is used in this

Table 3. Association between age at first marriage and some selected socio-economic variables.

Variables	Age at first marriage			Total
	< 15	15-17	18+	
Respondent's education				
No education	70(28.1)	140 (56.2)	39 (15.7)	249 (100)
Primary	72(39.6)	92(50.5)	18 (9.9)	182 (100)
Secondary	41(24.3)	95(56.2)	33 (19.5)	169 (100)
Higher secondary & higher	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	9 (100)	9 (100)
Total	183 (30.0)	327 (53.7)	99 (16.3)	609 (100)
$\chi^2 = 60.573$, df = 6, p = 0.000				
Father's education				
No education	92(30.9)	164 (55.0)	42 (14.1)	298 (100)
Primary	65(32.7)	105 (52.8)	29 (14.6)	199 (100)
Secondary	26(24.3)	55(51.4)	26 (24.3)	107 (100)
Higher secondary & higher	0(0.0)	3 (60.0)	2 (40.0)	5 (100)
Total	183 (30.0)	327 (53.7)	99 (16.3)	609 (100)
$\chi^2 = 10.669$, df = 6, p = 0.099				
Husband's education				
No education	39(32.2)	70(57.9)	12 (9.9)	121 (100)
Primary	74(34.9)	114 (53.8)	24 (11.3)	212 (100)
Secondary	66(27.8)	128 (54.0)	43 (18.1)	237 (100)
Higher secondary & higher	4 (10.3)	15(38.5)	20 (51.3)	39 (100)
Total	183 (30.0)	327 (53.7)	99 (16.3)	609 (100)
$\chi^2 = 45.521$, df = 6, p = 0.000				
Family's monthly income (BDT)				
< 2000	7 (46.7)	7 (46.7)	1 (6.7)	15 (100)
2000-2999	24(39.3)	29(47.5)	8 (13.8)	61 (100)
3000-3999	75(33.3)	122 (54.2)	28 (12.4)	225 (100)
4000+	77(25.0)	169 (54.9)	62 (20.1)	308 (100)
Total	183 (30.0)	327 (53.7)	99 (16.3)	609 (100)
$\chi^2 = 13.285$, df = 6, p = 0.039				
Religion				
Muslim	177 (30.5)	311 (53.5)	93 (16.0)	581 (100)
Non-Muslim	6 (21.4)	16(57.1)	6 (21.4)	28 (100)
Total	183 (30.0)	327 (53.7)	99 (16.3)	609 (100)
$\chi^2 = 13.285$, df = 6, p = 0.039				

Figures in parentheses indicates percentage; BDT = Bangladesh currency –that is, Taka.

study to identify the significant relationship of the independent variables on age at first marriage when the variables are taken together. For this purpose, the dependent variable, age at first marriage is dichotomized by assessing the value of 0 for age at first marriage being less than 18 years and the value of 1 for age being 18 years and above, as the country's legal age at marriage for female is 18 years. Results based on the multivariate logistic regression analysis for the early age at first

marriage is shown in Table 5.

Education is the single factor most strongly related to the postponement of marriage (Jejeebhoy, 1995). From Table 5, it is evident that education is a key determinant for the variation in the age at first marriage. Respondents with secondary and higher education are 23% more likely to marry at age 18 years and above than their illiterate counterparts. Respondents with primary education are 39% negatively significant and less likely to marry at age

Table 4. Association between age at first conception and some selected socio-economic variables.

Variables	Age at first conception			Total
	< 15	15-17	18+	
Respondent's education				
No education	23(10.7)	121 (56.5)	70 (32.7)	214 (100)
Primary	27(17.0)	100 (62.9)	32 (20.1)	159 (100)
Secondary	13 (9.0)	71(49.3)	60 (41.7)	144 (100)
Higher secondary & higher	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	4 (100)	4 (100)
Total	63(12.1)	292 (56.0)	166 (31.9)	521 (100)
$\chi^2 = 26.909$, df = 6, p = 0.000				
Husband's education				
No education	13(12.3)	64(60.4)	29 (27.4)	106 (100)
Primary	24(13.6)	109 (61.9)	43 (24.4)	176 (100)
Secondary	25(11.9)	110 (52.4)	75 (35.7)	210 (100)
Higher secondary & higher	1(3.4)	9 (31.0)	19 (65.5)	29 (100)
Total	63(12.1)	292 (56.0)	166 (31.9)	521 (100)
$\chi^2 = 22.342$, df = 6, p = 0.001				
Family's monthly income (BDT)				
< 2000	1(7.7)	11(84.6)	1 (7.7)	13 (100)
2000-2999	9 (19.1)	23(48.9)	15 (31.9)	47 (100)
3000-3999	22(11.1)	124 (62.3)	53 (26.6)	199 (100)
4000+	31(11.8)	134 (51.1)	97 (37.0)	262 (100)
Total	63(12.1)	292 (56.0)	166 (31.9)	521 (100)
$\chi^2 = 13.450$, df = 6, p = 0.036				
Religion				
Muslim	62(12.5)	278 (56.0)	156 (31.5)	496 (100)
Non-Muslim	1(4.0)	14(56.0)	10 (40.0)	25 (100)
Total	63(12.1)	292 (56.0)	166 (31.9)	521 (100)
$\chi^2 = 13.285$, df = 6, p = 0.039				

Figures in parentheses indicates percentage; BDT = Bangladesh currency –that is, Taka.

18 years and above than the reference category. One possible reason might be for that, after the completion of primary education of their children (especially girls), parents force to engage them in marriage. Traditionally, female education has been accorded a low priority in Bangladesh due to poverty, social directives for female seclusion and the low value of girls. In cases of father's education, similar results are also found, where fathers with secondary and higher education have 35% significantly with more tendency at the late marriage (that is, 18 years and above) of their daughters than those are illiterate. But, primary educated fathers are 22% negatively significant and less likely to prefer late marriage of their daughters than the reference category. Husbands with secondary and higher education are 2.28 times and those with primary education are 1.16 times strongly significant and more willingly to marry their wives at age 18 years and above than the reference category.

Early marriage is also very much affected by the family's monthly income. Several cross-cultural studies, South and Crowder (2000), Synder et al. (2004) showed that people from economically disadvantaged families tended to marry earlier as compared with those from advanced families. Respondents with family's monthly income BDT 3000 and above are 1.19 times more likely to marry at age 18 years and above than the reference category (Table 5). Superstitious on religion influences to get early marriage and it is quite available in Muslim society. Non-Muslim respondents are 1.18 times more likely to prefer marriage at age 18 years and above than their Muslim counterparts.

Results of logistic regression analysis on early conception

Logistic regression model is also used here to identify the

Table 5. Results of logistic regression analysis on early marriage of the respondents.

Variables	ERC	SE	OR
Respondent's education			
No education @	-	-	1.00
Primary	-0.49*	0.31	0.61
Secondary and higher	0.21	0.27	1.23
Father's education			
No education @	-	-	1.00
Primary	-0.25*	0.28	0.78
Secondary and higher	0.30*	0.30	1.35
Husband's education			
No education @	-	-	1.00
Primary	0.15	0.38	1.16
Secondary and higher	0.82***	0.38	2.28
Family's monthly income (BDT)			
< 3000 @	-	-	1.00
3000+	0.17	0.39	1.19
Religion			
Muslim @	-	-	1.00
Non-Muslim	0.17	0.49	1.18
Constant	-2.22***	0.47	0.11
-2 Log likelihood		514.84	
Cox and Snell R Square		0.04	
Nagelkerke R Square		0.07	

ERC = Estimated regression coefficient; SE = Standard error of ERC; OR = Odds ratios; @ = Reference category; BDT = Bangladesh currency- Taka; Coefficient significant at least 10 percent level is shown in bold type; and level of significance: ***p<0.01; **p<0.05; *p<0.10.

risk of factors for early age at first conception. In this model, age at first conception was used as the dependent variable, which is dichotomized by assessing the value of 1 for age at first conception being 18 years and above and the value of 0 for age being less than 18 years. Results based on multivariate regression analysis for the early age at first conception are presented in Table 6.

Like early marriage, early conception is also significantly affected by education. Respondents with secondary and higher education are 1.32 times significantly and more likely and those have primary education are 47% negatively significant and less likely prefer to conceive at age 18 years and above than those are illiterate. Educated husbands are more conscious as compared with those have no education about the age at conception of their wives. Secondary and higher educated husbands are 1.39 times significant and more likely than those with primary education and are less likely to prefer age 18 years and above for the conception

of their wives than the reference category. Respondents with family's monthly income BDT 3000 and above are 1.10 times more likely to conceive at age 18 years and above than the reference category. Family planning method is an important concern about the early conception. Respondents, who were not using family planning method are 31% negatively significant and less likely to conceive at age 18 years and above than the reference category. Non-Muslim respondents are 1.37 times more preferable to conceive at age 18 years and above than their Muslim counterparts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the efforts of reformers in the early part of 20th century, early marriage and early conception have received scant attention from the modern women's rights and children's rights movement. Although, most countries including Bangladesh have laws that regulate marriage,

Table 6. Results of logistic regression analysis on age at first conception of the respondents.

Variables	ERC	SE	OR
Respondent's education			
No education ®	-	-	1.00
Primary	-0.64***	0.25	0.53
Secondary and higher	0.28**	0.24	1.32
Husband's education			
No education ®	-	-	1.00
Primary	-0.16	0.29	0.85
Secondary and higher	0.33*	0.27	1.39
Family's monthly income (BDT)			
< 3000 ®	-	-	1.00
3000+	0.06	0.32	1.10
FP method use by respondents			
Yes ®	-	-	1.00
No	-0.37**	0.22	0.69
Religion			
Muslim ®	-	-	1.00
Non-Muslim	0.32	0.43	1.37
Constant	-0.74**	0.38	0.48
-2 Log likelihood		624.13	
Cox and Snell R Square		0.05	
Nagelkerke R Square		0.07	

ERC = Estimated regression coefficient; SE = Standard Error of ERC; OR = Odds Ratios; ® = Reference category; BDT = Bangladesh currency- Taka; FP = Family planning; Coefficient significant at least 10 percent level is shown in bold type; and level of significance: ***p<0.01; **p<0.05; *p<0.10.

both in terms of minimum age and consent, these laws may not be applied and few prosecutions are ever brought against lawbreakers- parents, officiators or spouses.

This study shows that education and monthly income are the major problems from the respondent's point of view for the early age at marriage and early conception as well. From the information, it is observed that high percentage of the respondents was not using family planning method that resulted in early conception. Both age at marriage and age at conception largely affected the religion. The study also reveals that out of the entire selected variables respondent's education, father's education, husband's education are significant and family's monthly income, religion of the respondents are strongly more influential factors in determining the likelihood of the early marriage and early conception of the respondents. If the female education could be made universal up to secondary and higher level, it will greatly help to increase the age at marriage and sequentially age at conception. Bangladesh is one of the largest Muslim

countries in the world, where both early marriage and early conception are widely practiced. Therefore, to ensure higher age at marriage and conception, the bad effect of early marriage and early conception should be described by learned spokesman through religious conference is firmly needed. Poverty is one of the major factors underpinning early marriage. Hence, there is a fundamental need for the greater investment in education and employment for the population of the slum areas especially for female population throughout the country, which is very much effective in reducing poverty and ultimately resulted in the rising age at marriage and conception of the female population.

Theoretically some of the strategic documents and policy papers (like education policy, health policy women policy etc) are sound and seems to be implementable, but in reality, the outcomes are yet to be discernible. The government needs to be creative in renewing and revising strategies and approaches for implementation, responding to the current challenges by not only resorting to old failed policies packaged in new covers. Unless

measures are taken to address early marriage and sequentially early conception, it will continue to be a major stumbling block to the achievement of human rights.

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