

Child Marriage in Bangladesh (1960-2016): Historical Trends, Natural Calamities, Policy Interventions, and Socioeconomic Impact

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Extended Abstract

Background: Child marriage, defined as a formal or informal union before the age of 18 [1], is a global phenomenon that affects more than 650 million girls and women [2]. Child marriage is more common in low-income countries, but most cases (65%) occur in lower-middle-income countries [3]. Almost half (47%) of the world's child brides reside in South Asia, with Bangladesh having the highest prevalence of child marriage among South Asian countries [4]. Despite the legal minimum age for female marriage being 18, the prevalence of child marriage declined only a small amount, from 65% to 50% between 2011 to 2022, indicating a persistent and pervasive problem [5,6]. This study aims to analyze historical and current patterns of child marriage across regions, districts, and socioeconomic groups; identify the key drivers and barriers of child marriage; assess the impacts of different intervention and historical events like, natural disasters, and war on child marriage.

Methods: Data from the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) from 1994 to 2018 were used to assess the incidence of child marriage. The analysis included 173,377 women aged 8-49 years. The incidence of child marriage from 1960 to 2016 was calculated based on the life history for every woman, and a logistic regression model was applied to identify the factors influencing child marriage in Bangladesh.

Results: In 1964, 99% of marriages in Bangladesh involved child brides. By 1971, this percentage had decreased by 3%, and after 45 years, in 2016, the rate of child marriage had dropped by 45%, reaching 52%. The yearly incidence of child marriage fluctuated due to historical events such as war, famine, and various interventions. As shown in Fig. 1, the liberation war in 1971 significantly influenced the incidence of child marriage. The famine of 1974 led to an increase in child marriages, with the trend continuing upward until 1983. This rate started decreasing, along with the expansion of female employment in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector following the 1982 industrial policy. Further reductions were seen at

the time of the introduction of the female school stipend program, aimed at subsidizing girls' secondary education in rural areas. This program helped reduce dropout rates and may have contributed to a decline in child marriage.

Women's education was a significant determinant of child marriage. Uneducated women had 2.71 times higher odds to marry as children compared to women with secondary or higher education. Similarly, socio-economic status played an important role; women from the poorest households had 2.15 times higher odds of child marriage than those from wealthier households. Rural girls had 1.18 times the odds of being married as children compared to their urban counterparts. Regionally, Rajshahi and Khulna divisions had the highest odds of child marriage (OR: 1.29), followed by Rangpur (OR: 1.18) and Mymensingh (OR: 1.07), while Sylhet had the lowest odds (OR: 0.42) compared to Dhaka.

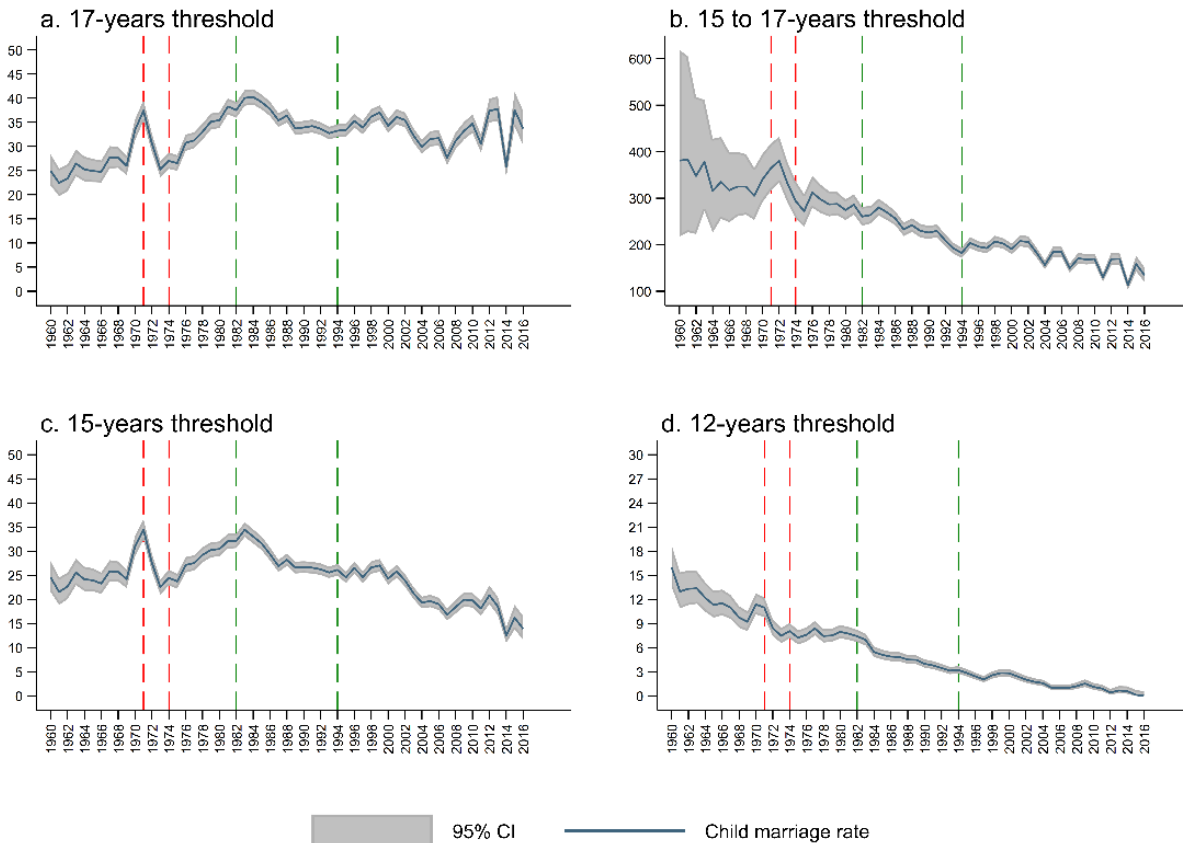


Figure 1: Yearly incidence of child marriage in Bangladesh.

Conclusions: In Bangladesh more than half of all girls have been affected by child marriage, which is a persistent problem, but this study shows that rates of child marriage have been declining rapidly in recent years and the risk of being married has dropped rapidly for very young girls. Key determinants include socio-economic status, education, and geographic location. Addressing these factors is crucial for developing policies to reduce child marriage incidence.

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