



GETTING THE EVIDENCE: ASIA CHILD MARRIAGE INITIATIVE

SUMMARY REPORT



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Front Cover – Sadia* from Bangladesh was married at 14 and currently has an 8 month old daughter. She had never seen her husband before her wedding.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE RESEARCH REVEALED THAT FEMALES MARRY SIGNIFICANTLY YOUNGER THAN MALES IN ALL THREE COUNTRIES AND THAT THIS PATTERN IS ROOTED IN RIGID GENDER NORMS.

In 2014 and 2015, as part of the Asia Child Marriage Initiative (ACMI), Plan International and Coram International undertook a research study in three countries in Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia).

The purpose of the ACMI Research was to gather in-depth and detailed evidence on the root causes of child marriage practices. The research focused on exploring social attitudes, values and norms concerning child marriage, and identifying the structural and environmental factors which influence them. In addition, the research informed the development of an index for measuring environmental factors associated with the acceptability of child marriage which will be used by Plan International to track progress and improve the effectiveness of our child marriage programming globally.

The research found rates of child marriage of girls to be high across all three countries, particularly in Bangladesh; rates of marriage of boys were found to be highest in Pakistan.

Overall, the research revealed that females marry significantly younger than males in all three countries and that this pattern is rooted in rigid gender norms, including a highly gendered division of labour according to which men are the primary income earners, and women are assigned to household work and child care. The research findings also confirmed that child marriage often occurs as a response to income poverty, which creates powerful and rational financial incentives for the early marriage of girls, particularly in contexts where there is the institution of dowry.

The research found that the number of years a girl spends in education is associated with her age of first marriage; girls who stay in school longer tend to marry later. Furthermore, male sexual violence and control of female sexuality underlie the practice of child marriage, whilst improved access to sexual and reproductive health rights reduces child marriage acceptability.

In addition to providing in depth analysis of these structural factors, the report also provides detailed programmatic recommendations to be actioned at individual, family, community and institutional levels in order to address poverty and lack of opportunity, improve access to education, promote community safety and address impunity for violence against women and girls, increase access to sexual and reproductive rights and services, and strengthen laws and institutional frameworks to respond to child marriage. Finally, the report provides suggestions for improved approaches to sensitisation and messaging conducted by advocates campaigning against child marriage.

This document presents a summary of the research findings. A more comprehensive report that includes detailed country profiles and primary data can be access through this link:

<https://plan-international.org/getting-evidence-asia-child-marriage-initiative>



Monufa* (on right), 16, Bangladesh. When Monufa's father decided to arrange a marriage in order to reduce the costs to his family, Monufa spoke to friends who then let a local children's organisation know. After talking to her parents, they agreed to delay the marriage and allow Monufa to continue her education. Monufa is now in Grade 9 and wants to be a nurse when she finishes school.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by Elizabeth Yarrow, Kara Apland, Kirsten Anderson and Professor Carolyn Hamilton at Coram International.

Coram International is an internationally renowned multi-disciplinary consultancy team specialising in child rights. We are based within the Children's Legal Centre (CCLC); the UK's leading children's legal charity, committed to promoting children's rights in the UK and worldwide. Coram International works around the world in partnership with governments, UN bodies and (I)NGOs in over 40 countries, to promote the rights of children through the reform of law, policy and practice. For the past 17 years Coram International has conducted in-depth qualitative and quantitative research and published widely on topics related to children's rights and gender issues.

Data collection and entry was supervised by the authors. In Bangladesh, data entry was carried out by: Nazrul Islam Babu, Debashis Kumar Ghose, Rashedul Haque and Zakia Sultana (enumerators), and Md. Kamal Pasa and Afsana Sultana (qualitative researchers); data entry was carried out by Farhad Kabir; interpretation was provided by Sumaiya Tabassum Ahmed; and field work was coordinated by Md. Kamal Pasa. In Indonesia, data collection was carried out by: Chitra Anadhita, King Buana, Dessi Kuswana, Fitria Umami and Solikin (enumerators), and Didi Ahmadi and Lanny Octavian (qualitative researchers); data entry was carried out by Muhammad Akib; and field work was planned and coordinated by Herman. In Pakistan, Reflect Global coordinated data collection and entry, led by Muhammad Noman Ali: qualitative data collection was conducted by Younis Mari and Shehneela Mazhar; and survey data was collected by Muhammad Abu-Bakar, Abdul Ghafoor, Asif Habib, Fozia Jabeen, Sana Kanwal, Shakeela Khan, Musarrat, Noor-ul-Ain, Yasir Noshin, Zahida Parveen and Qurat-ul-ain Yousaf (enumerators).

The authors would like to thank all of the staff from Plan International Asia's regional office for their assistance and guidance throughout the study and for their feedback on earlier drafts of this report. In particular, we would like to thank: Alexander Munive, Matthew Riley, Alessandra Tranquilli and Noshaba Zafar.

They would also like to thank staff at Plan International's Country Offices: Md. Abdullah Al Mamun, Farukh Ahmed, Soumya Brata Guha, Awlad Hossain and Jannatul Ferdous Ruma (Bangladesh); Moudy Cynthia, Rasita Ekawati, Hery Nahampun and Desry Yuniafitri (Indonesia); and Sofia Naveed, Sultan Tanoli and Naeem Tufail (Pakistan) for their invaluable assistance in organising the field research and providing resources, information and helpful insights. They are also grateful to Plan International staff who attended a validation workshop in Bangkok in March 2015 for their useful feedback on an earlier draft of this report and initial recommendations.

Further thanks goes to Jorun Arndt and Catrin Gosby at Coram International for their assistance in carrying out desk-based research to inform the literature review, and Jennifer Roest, for her assistance in developing researcher training materials and qualitative data collection tools.

Finally, the authors would like to thank all persons who generously gave up their time to participate in the study through interviews, focus groups, participatory group activities and through responding to surveys.



Aalia*, 13, Pakistan. Aalia was engaged to be married when she was 13 years old because her family could not afford to keep her in school. However, Aalia's mother, who was married when she was 14, opposed the engagement and was successful in stopping the marriage. Aalia is now back in school and her mother is a prominent local activist against child marriage.

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INTRODUCTION

This research study provides evidence on the underlying causes of child marriage practices in three case study countries: Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan. The purpose of the study was to gather in-depth and detailed evidence on social attitudes, values and norms concerning child marriage, and the structural and environmental factors which influence them, including legal and policy systems, levels of education, and access to economic resources and benefits. The results of the research will assist in the design of effective advocacy, policy and programming interventions aimed at eradicating child marriage.

IF A GIRL DOESN'T GET MARRIED PEOPLE WILL START TO GOSSIP ABOUT HER. SHE WILL LOSE HER REPUTATION... FOR A MAN IT IS LESS OF AN ISSUE. HE CAN REMAIN SINGLE.
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT IN BANGLADESH.

METHODOLOGY

The study applied a mixed methods approach to draw on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Initially, a desk review was carried out to examine relevant international and domestic legal frameworks and existing literature on child marriage in the three case study countries (Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan). Following the desk review, the national and international researchers undertook both quantitative and qualitative data collection in seven sites selected to represent Plan International child marriage programme areas. The research areas were selected in order to ensure the relevance of research findings for Plan International programming.

The quantitative element of the research was designed to achieve comprehensive and representative data on prevalence, practices and attitudes regarding child marriage in each of the selected research sites. Data was collected through the administration of a household survey, which consisted of closed and multiple choice questions relevant to the research questions. In each research site, households were selected through systematic random sampling, and within each household an individual was randomly selected to participate in the survey. In total, 2,742 surveys were completed, including 790 individuals (484 females, 306 males) in Bangladesh; 771 (472 females, 299 males) in Indonesia; and 1181 (767 females, 414 males) in Pakistan.¹ Quantitative data was analysed with the use of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software.

The qualitative research was designed to collect in-depth, contextual information on the nature and causes of child marriage and how child marriage is perceived and understood within the communities included in the research. The qualitative data was collected through a series of key informant, semi-structured interviews, focus groups discussions, and participatory methods. Sampling for the qualitative research was purposive (rather than random) and aimed to achieve diversity across

¹ Females were overrepresented in the survey compared to males. This is because researchers were unable to visit selected homes more than once, meaning that they had to select from those individuals present in the household during the first visit. Females were more likely to be present at home than males, resulting in their overrepresentation in the survey.



Fozia* (in orange), Pakistan. Fozia's family arranged her marriage when she was a child, which would have forced her to leave school. However, interventions from Plan International managed to delay her marriage until she is an adult. She is currently continuing her education.

a range of different variables including age, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, location, and experience in relation to child marriage. Qualitative data was analysed manually through a thorough review of interview transcripts, recordings, and other materials to identify key themes, patterns, discourses, relationships and explanations relevant to the research questions.

In total, 158 semi-structured interviews were carried out with community members (boys and girls from the age of 12 years; young people; and parents) and other key stakeholders, including community leaders; government officials; marriage officiates and registrars; teachers; health workers; and persons who had been married as a child. In addition, 47 focus group discussions or participatory activities were carried out with young people aged 12 – 25 years, and parents.

An Index of Risk of Child Marriage Acceptability

As part of the research, an index was developed in order to 'score' communities according to the presence/absence of indicators associated with norms and attitudes about when a girl's marriage is necessary, desirable, acceptable or unacceptable. The index may be used to measure changes over time, in a given community, regarding the presence of structural/underlying environmental factors associated with child marriage acceptability.

The index comprises a set of indicators that signal (reveal) the presence of structural/environmental factors associated with child marriage (acceptability). Each community was assigned a value for each indicator based on the relative presence of that indicator on a scale from 1-10. Each indicator was then weighted according to its relative influence on norms that are supportive or prohibitive of child marriage (child marriage acceptability). Weighting was determined through analysis of the quantitative data. Where there was found to be a strong association between a particular indicator and ideas accepting of child marriage, the indicator was given a high weighting. Where there was found to be a weak association between a particular indicator and ideas accepting of child marriage, the indicator was given a low weighting. The final score for each community was then determined by multiplying the values for each indicator by their weight and aggregating these results to create a final score.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Marriage Practices

“To be married is a must”

In all three case-study countries, marriage was found to play a central and fundamental role in social life. There is a widespread presumption that people ought to marry for a range of reasons relating to sexuality, reproduction, kinship, companionship, religion, culture, and economic wellbeing. Rather than speaking of marriage as a choice, participants tended to speak of it as an obligation as one participant in Bangladesh put it: “marriage is mandatory according to Islam”² and a respondent in Indonesia similarly asserted: “to be married is a must”.³

The majority of survey respondents across all three countries were married. As many as 90% of all adults⁴ were married, with a strikingly low number (less than 2%) of respondents remaining single beyond the age of 25 years. As one 14-year-old boy in Bangladesh explained: “marriage is a social norm practiced over the years. Without marriage, a person is treated as incomplete, or sexually disabled, or characterless all together.”⁵

Reasons for marriage depend on gender. When speaking of reasons why men should marry, participants tended to explain that marriage is necessary to satisfy men’s sexual, emotional and reproductive needs, and that acquiring a wife enables the fulfilment of household work and parental care. When asked why women should marry, on the other hand, participants tended to focus on the risks associated with remaining single, and the burden that unmarried women present to their parents; as one young woman explained: “if a girl doesn’t get married people will start to gossip about her. She will lose her reputation, and people will think she is having affairs. For a man it is less of an issue. He can remain single.”⁶

WHEN SPEAKING OF REASONS WHY MEN SHOULD MARRY, PARTICIPANTS TENDED TO EXPLAIN THAT MARRIAGE IS NECESSARY TO SATISFY MEN'S SEXUAL, EMOTIONAL AND REPRODUCTIVE NEEDS.

In a participatory group activity in Bangladesh, children wrote down the reasons that people in their community get married: “Boys marry for young girl, sex, dowry and partner. Girls marry for shelter.”⁷

Females marry significantly younger than males

As marriage is seen as both necessary and desirable, for both men and women, it is perhaps unsurprising that participants tend to marry at a relatively early age. The average (mean)⁸ age for marriage amongst the survey sample was found to be relatively low across research sites in all three countries, and females tended to be married several years younger than males. The mean ages of first marriage in Bangladesh research

² Interview, man, 19 years, Gazipur, Bangladesh

³ Interview, woman, 18 years, Cigudeg, Bogor

⁴ Defined as persons 18 years and above

⁵ Interview, boy, 17 years, Dinapur, Bangladesh

⁶ Interview, girl, 17 years, Gazipur, Bangladesh

⁷ Participative Group Activity (Body Map), children 12-14 years, Dinapur, Bangladesh

⁸ Mean refers to the central tendency of a probability distribution, it is calculated as the sum of every value in the distribution, divided by the sample.

ACROSS THE CASE STUDY COUNTRIES, IDEAS ABOUT GENDER AND SEXUALITY PROMOTE THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SUBORDINATION OF GIRLS AND WOMEN IN RELATION TO BOYS AND MEN.

sites were 23.24 years for males, and 16.28 years for females; 23.98 years for males and 18.63 years for females in the sites selected in Indonesia; and 21.41 years for males and 18.77 years for females in Pakistan. In all country case studies there was a significant difference between the mean ages of first marriage for females and for males.⁹

The mean age of marriage for females was significantly lower in the sites in Bangladesh compared to the sites selected in Indonesia and Pakistan.¹⁰ The difference between the mean age of first marriage for females and mean age of first marriage for males was also found to be highest in Bangladesh, at 6.68 years.

Analysis of the age gap between women/girls and their partners across countries reveals the trend that the younger a girl is when she gets married the larger the gap between her age and her partner's age. The data also demonstrates that respondents who were married as children were, in general, married to partners relatively older than themselves, compared to those who were married as adults.

These results appear to indicate that there is a strong association between early marriage of girls, and a larger age gap between females and males within marriage. This is important given that the data revealed an overwhelmingly dominant norm across all three countries that it is preferable for wives to be younger than their husbands. This both reflects and reinforces powerful gender hierarchies within marriage.

Younger wives considered to be more obedient of their husbands

Across the case study countries, ideas about gender and sexuality promote the social and economic subordination of girls and women in relation to boys and men; as many as 89.1% of respondents agreed with the statement that “a wife should be subservient to her husband”, and 90.5% agreed that “a husband should be the head of the household”.

There is a widespread view that having an age gap between husbands and wives is necessary to secure male dominance in the household; the majority of respondents in all three countries (55.4%), and over three quarters (75.4%) of respondents in Pakistan agreed with the statement: “younger brides are preferable because they are more obedient and respectful of their husbands.” Interestingly, across all three countries older respondents were considerably more likely to agree with this statement than younger respondents, however there were no discernible differences between the views of male and female respondents.

Men and boys interviewed as part of the qualitative research conveyed a strong sense of entitlement to dominate their wives in all aspects of marriage, and expressed the view that this is best achieved through marrying a younger woman/girl; as one boy in Bangladesh explained: “I must choose a bride who is younger than me so that I can control her. Moreover, she will be able to satisfy my demands... if I marry an older woman, she will try to have authority over me, and might not satisfy me sexually.”¹¹ Relationships where the bride is either the same age or older

⁹ T-test, $p < .001$ for all countries.

¹⁰ ANOVA, $p < .001$.

¹¹ Interview, boy, 17 years, Dinapur, Bangladesh

than her husband, were perceived as lacking in ‘respect’, ‘understanding’ and harmony. A group of boys candidly elaborated: “People [are] taught that a same aged wife never shows respect to her husband. This is a patriarchal society. Here men want to exploit women. But it is not easy to exploit a wife of the same age, or an older wife. If the wife is older than the husband, people raise the question of who is the head of family. And I think this type of couple will never be happy.”¹²

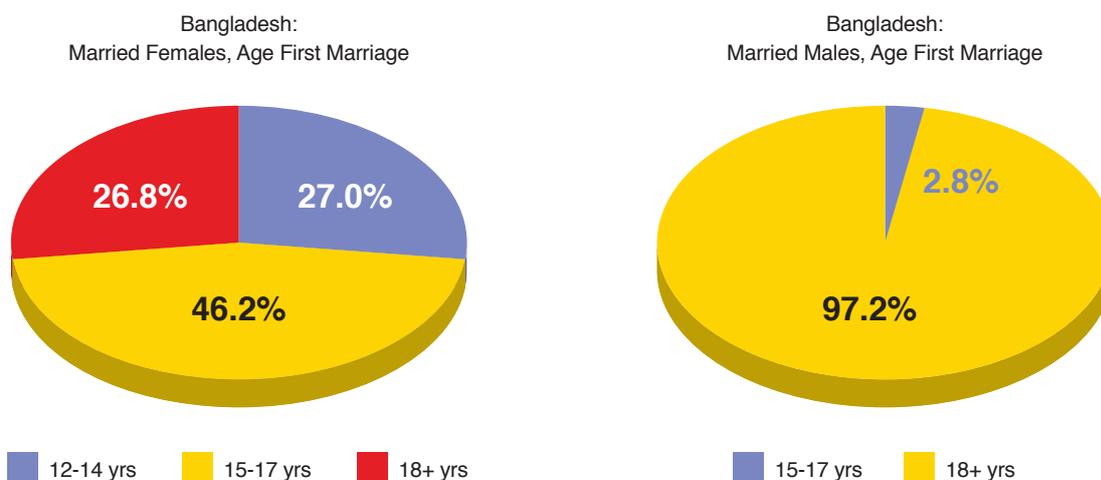
AS MANY AS 89.1% OF RESPONDENTS AGREED WITH THE STATEMENT THAT “A WIFE SHOULD BE SUBSERVIENT TO HER HUSBAND”.

Rates of Child Marriage are high, especially of girls in Bangladesh

Consistent with existing evidence, rates of child marriage were found to be relatively high in all three countries, particularly in research sites in Bangladesh, and were found to be significantly higher amongst girls than amongst boys.¹³

In research sites in Bangladesh an extraordinarily high proportion of married females, 73%, were married as children. This compares to only 2.8% of married males. Furthermore, whilst there were no males in research sites in Bangladesh married under the age of 15 years, over a quarter of the sample of married females, 27%, were married under the age of 15 years. Whilst this is a very high rate of child marriage, **the data indicates that rates may be reducing over time.** Whilst almost 80% of females over the age of 50 years were married before the age of 18, only 67.3%, of females aged 20-49 years had married under the age of 18.

Figure 1: Rates of child marriage in Bangladesh



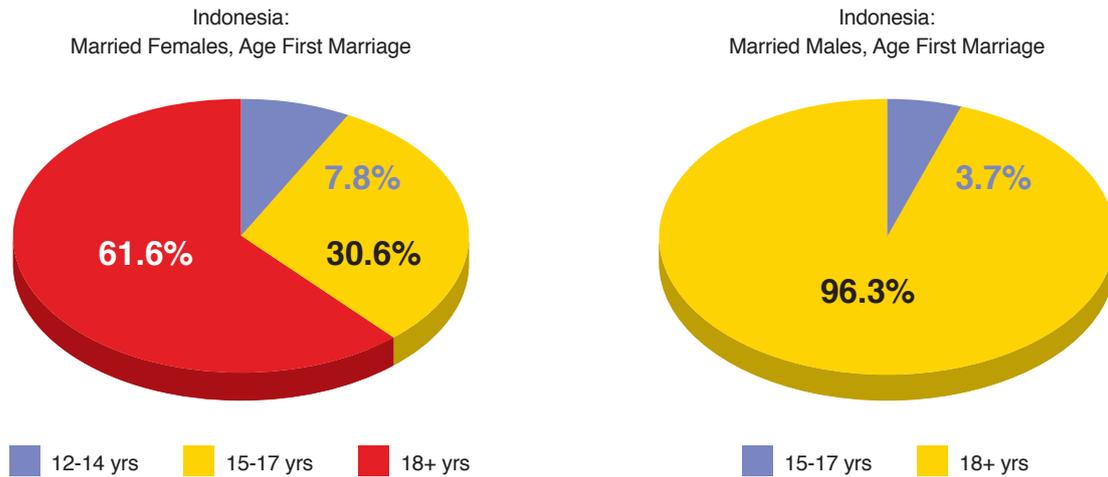
Rates of child marriage in Indonesia

Rates of child marriage of girls were found to be substantially lower in research sites in Indonesia: 38% of married females were married under the age of 18 years, and 7.8% were married under the age of 15; the gender difference in research sites in Indonesia was also striking: only 3.7% of the sample of married males married as children, and no males had married under the age of 15 years.

¹² Focus Group Discussion, 9 boys, 14-17 years, Dinapur, Bangladesh

¹³ Chi-square test, p<.001 across all countries.

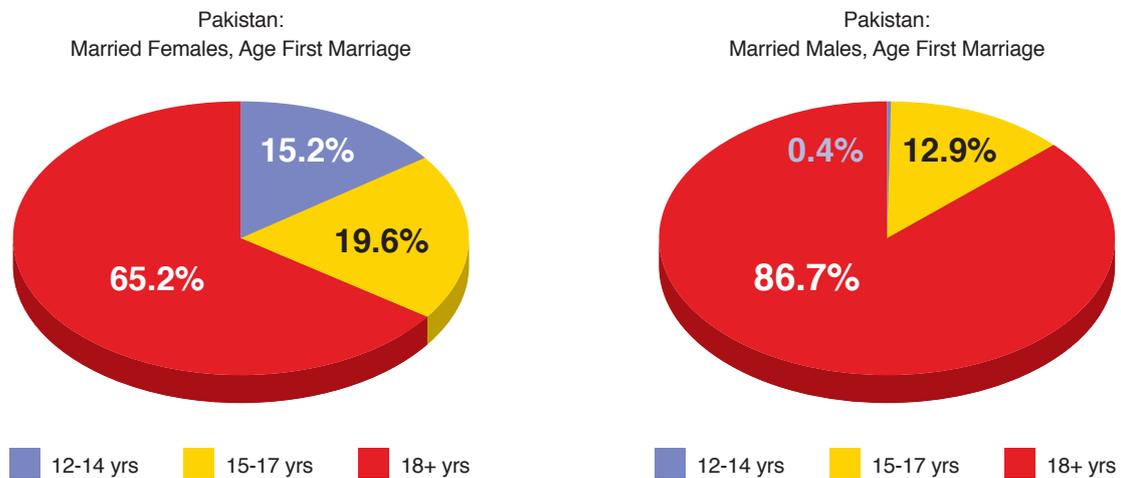
Figure 2: Rates of child marriage in Indonesia



Rates of child marriage in Pakistan

Rates of child marriage of girls were proportionally lowest in research sites in Pakistan, with 34.8% of married females first married under the age of 18 years; however, rates of very early marriage (under 15) of girls remained comparatively high at 15.2%. Additionally, rates of child marriage of boys in Pakistan were also substantially higher than in the other two countries, with 12.9% of males reporting that they had been married under the age of eighteen years.

Figure 3: Rates of child marriage in Pakistan



The relatively high rates of early marriage of boys in Pakistan may be explained by the prevalence of watta satta marriages (the simultaneous exchange of a brother-sister, uncle-niece, or cousin pairing across two families in order to strengthen the bond between them). There may be compelling reasons to complete a marriage exchange across two families even in circumstances where the ages of the couple do not match, and/or when either the bride or indeed the groom are comparatively young. Participants in the two rural research locations in Pakistan mentioned several cases in which young boys had been married as children, in the context of a watta satta marriage; one Pakistani boy explained:

“I married my cousin; and my cousin married my sister. My father said to me – ‘your sister is in trouble in your cousin’s house. They beat her.’ My father decided that I should marry and bring their daughter (my cousin) to our house. It was a watta satta marriage. I liked my wife before marriage but I did not want to marry at this age. I was very young, I felt scared. This marriage would have not taken place so early if my sister was not beaten.”¹⁴

- ▶ While it is generally considered unacceptable for both men and women to remain unmarried too far into adulthood, the consequences of not being married appear to be significantly worse for women.
- ▶ Rates of child marriage of girls are high across all three countries but particularly in Bangladesh.
- ▶ The younger a girl is when she marries, the bigger the age difference between her and her husband.
- ▶ Rates of child marriage of boys are highest in Pakistan

Child Marriage: Norms and Attitudes

Measuring the acceptability of child marriage

The survey tool for the study was designed to collect data on dominant norms and attitudes relating to (child) marriage, as well as its prevalence. Participants were read a statement (such as “there are advantages to marriage under 18 years”) and then asked to express their level of agreement on a scale with 7 variables: strongly agree; agree; slightly agree; neutral; slightly disagree; disagree; strongly disagree. While some statements expressed views that were accepting of child marriage practices, others expressed views that were not accepting of child marriage practices.

I LIKED MY WIFE BEFORE MARRIAGE BUT I DID NOT WANT TO MARRY AT THIS AGE. I WAS VERY YOUNG, I FELT SCARED.
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT IN PAKISTAN

Bangladesh: A discrepancy between attitudes and practices?

Interestingly, the data from Bangladesh revealed significantly different (reported) attitudes towards child marriage compared to the other two countries. For example, whilst over half (50.8%) of respondents in Pakistan and 45.5% of respondents in Indonesia agreed with the statement: “there are advantages for girls to marrying under 18 years”, as few as 2.2% of respondents in Bangladesh agreed with this statement. Similarly, whilst 57.6% of participants in Pakistan and 59% of participants in Indonesia agreed that marrying girls young can provide them with security, this was true of only 14.9% of respondents in Bangladesh; and whilst 90.3% of respondents in Bangladesh agreed or strongly agreed that pregnancy under 18 years can cause health problems, this was the case for only 56.6% of respondents in Indonesia, and 32% of respondents in Pakistan.

Nevertheless, in response to the statement “marrying girls under 18 years is the tradition in our community”, as many as 88% of participants in Bangladesh agreed, compared to 48.5% in Pakistan and 30.2% in Indonesia. Given this, and the findings in relation to actual marriage practices, which, as described above, reveal significantly higher rates of child marriage of girls in Bangladesh compared to Indonesia and Pakistan, it is surprising that only a relatively small proportion of

¹⁴ Interview, boy who was married at 13/14 years, 14/15 years, Ranjanpur, Pakistan

'IDEAS' ABOUT CHILD MARRIAGE DO NOT NECESSARILY CORRESPOND TO WHAT ACTUALLY OCCURS IN PRACTICE.

participants in Bangladesh expressed 'agreement' with statements supportive of child marriage. This contradiction may be explained by the fact that the research sites in Bangladesh had received higher levels of intervention by development partners and 'sensitisation' messages about the problems associated with child marriage. Bangladesh is also the country with the strictest laws on child marriage, which prohibit marriage of girls under the age of 18 years, and boys under the age of 21 years. Results may have been influenced by participants' desire to provide researchers with a 'legal' 'acceptable', or 'correct' response.

These results are important, as they indicate that 'ideas' about child marriage, at least those that people are willing to openly articulate or express, do not necessarily correspond to what actually occurs in practice.

Scoring child marriage acceptability

Each individual who participated in the survey was assigned a 'child marriage acceptability score' on a scale of 23-161 based on their responses to questions in the survey related to their own personal¹⁵ attitudes towards child marriage.¹⁶ A lower score corresponds to attitudes that are less accepting of child marriage, and a higher score corresponds to attitudes, which are more accepting of child marriage.

The mean 'acceptability score' in Indonesia was found to be 92.09 out of a possible maximum score of 161. The mean 'acceptability score' in Pakistan was found to be 99.13. The mean 'acceptability score' in Bangladesh was lower (perhaps for reasons discussed above) at 73.20. The absolute score for each country means very little in isolation. What is interesting, is the way in which the acceptability score was found to relate to other factors (including participants' level of income and education and access to sexual and reproductive health services), as will be explored in the following analysis.

As one would expect, individuals' acceptability scores were found to be negatively correlated with their stated ideal age of marriage for girls in all three countries: individuals with attitudes that are more accepting of child marriage reported a lower ideal age of marriage, and conversely, individuals with attitudes that are less accepting of child marriage tended to report a higher ideal age of marriage.¹⁷

Respondents accepting of child marriage tend to have married younger

It is important to recognise that the quantitative data can only provide a limited picture of the relationship between child marriage acceptability and child marriage practices; the relationship between individuals' attitudes and their own age of marriage is highly complex. For example, on the one hand a woman who married early might be more likely to recognise the disadvantages of early marriage – perhaps her marriage interrupted her schooling, or she was pressured to enter an exploitative match. On the other hand she may be inclined to adopt attitudes that normalise her own experience, especially if she comes from a background where community attitudes are generally more accepting of early marriage practices.

¹⁵ As opposed to statements that require respondents to describe attitudes in their community.

¹⁶ Responses were ranked on a 1-7 scale, where the lowest score (1) represents low levels of acceptability of child marriage, and the highest score (7) represents high levels of acceptability of child marriage. The responses were aggregated to assign each respondent an 'acceptability score' on a scale of 23-161, where low scores reflect non-acceptability of child marriage and high scores reflect.

¹⁷ Pakistan: Correlation coefficient = -.057, significant at the .05 level (one-tailed t-test); Bangladesh: Correlation coefficient = -.51, significant at the .01 level (one-tailed t-test); Indonesia: Correlation coefficient = -.236, significant at the .01 level (one-tailed t-test).

PEOPLE WHO WERE MARRIED AT A YOUNGER AGE WERE LIKELY TO BE SLIGHTLY MORE ACCEPTING OF CHILD MARRIAGE PRACTICES THAN THOSE WHO WERE MARRIED AT AN OLDER AGE.

It is interesting to note, however, that in Pakistan and Indonesia, there was a significant negative relationship between respondents' acceptability scores and their age of first marriage: in other words, people who were married at a younger age were likely to be slightly more accepting of child marriage practices than those who were married at an older age. This may reflect the fact that in families and communities where dominant norms support child marriage, marriages do occur earlier. In Bangladesh, however, there was no significant correlation between age of first marriage and the acceptability score. This reflects the fact that, as previously noted, participants' ideas about child marriage in Bangladesh appear to diverge significantly from actual behaviour, perhaps due to the prevalence of messaging and sensitisation about child marriage in the research sites in Bangladesh.

When is marriage acceptable?

"Religion says that if a boy is able to take care of his wife then he can marry. Girls are eligible from their first menstruation."¹⁸

The qualitative data indicates that in all research sites and across all case study countries, there is an age or stage of development below which marriage of a child is considered unacceptable on the grounds that the bride or groom is 'underage'; although the meaning of 'underage' is not always defined with reference to a discrete number. Ideas about when a girl is 'ready' for marriage are often defined through the appearance of biological and physical indicators, most significantly the onset of menstruation; as a group of Pakistani fathers expounded: "...[we] are living in a society which is mostly illiterate and people have no idea of ages in years or months. Most people look at the particular child's physical appearance as an indicator."¹⁹

Evidence from the survey supports these findings from the qualitative research: as many as 81% of respondents in Pakistan agreed with the statement 'a girl is ready to be married once she starts menstruating,' as did 62.6% of respondents in Indonesia.²⁰

Although the onset of puberty may signal that marriage of a child is now appropriate and acceptable, this is not to say that people find it ideal. The age at which participants felt that a person ought to marry was found to be shaped by ideas about when individuals are ready and able to assume the social and economic responsibilities associated with marriage, in addition to biological, sexual and reproductive ones. As a participant in Indonesia explained: "in Islam, girls attain aqil baligh [puberty] at 9, while boys attain it at 15. They can get married at that age as long as their parents give their consent. However, a child should not be married between 9-15 years old. They will not be able to manage the household, and their marriage will be ruined."²¹ And a participant in Pakistan explained: "when a boy is able to work, make money, his marriage should be arranged."²²

¹⁸ Interview, community leader, Gazipur, Bangladesh.

¹⁹ Focus Group Discussion, Fathers, 30-35 years, Muzaffargaraf, Pakistan.

²⁰ Only 2.7% of respondents agreed with this statement in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, as previously noted, these findings may be due to higher levels of intervention by development partners in the research sites Bangladesh, and 'sensitisation' messages about the problems associated with child marriage. Related to this, these findings may have also been affected by participants' perceptions of researchers as representatives of an international organisation that campaigns against child marriage, and their desire to provide an 'acceptable', 'appropriate' or 'correct' response.

²¹ Interview, religious leader, Cigudeg, Bogor, Indonesia.

²² Focus Group Discussion, fathers, 32-50 years, Ranjanpur, Pakistan.

Despite some limited recognition that it may be important for a bride to have a degree of emotional and intellectual maturity to enable her to fulfil female social roles and responsibilities associated with marriage, research findings indicate that biological or physical indicators play a more important role in determining when girls are perceived mature enough for marriage, than they do for boys. Even participants who rejected or challenged the idea that a girl is ready for marriage after first menstruation justified this primarily in terms of ideas about female physiology and reproductive development: “I worry that an underage girl will not be physically strong to bear the pregnancy.”²³

The reason for focusing primarily on the physical maturity of a girl in determining whether she is ready for marriage is due to the fact that female roles and responsibilities within marriage tend to be defined principally in terms of reproduction and reproductive work, activities that are primarily associated with biological functions of the body and are not thought to require a very high level of education or acquisition of skills. As one participant in Bangladesh explained, “in spite of their higher education girls have to perform family works. And secondary education is adequate enough to nurse the baby. It would be the right age for girls to be married.”²⁴ The male role within marriage, in contrast, is one of leadership and provider. A husband is expected to ‘govern’ his wife and family as well as supporting them financially. Therefore, it is considered important for boys to at least finish secondary education and to obtain financial independence and security before getting married.

“Parents will give consent for their son [to marry] when he already has his own income and has enough age; while for the daughter [consent will be given] when she gets a serious partner.”²⁵

ALTHOUGH PARTICIPANTS DID EXPRESS DISAPPROVAL OF EARLY MARRIAGE, THIS WAS DEFINED IN TERMS OF BEING TOO YOUNG TO TAKE ON THE REPRODUCTIVE, SEXUAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC WORK REQUIRED WITHIN MARRIAGE.

In other words, it is not only the gendered division of roles and responsibilities within marriage that shape people’s ideas about age and readiness for marriage, the relative value that is assigned to these roles is also important. Women’s readiness for marriage is defined by their bodies, men’s by their cultural and social, economic and educational achievements, because the values imposed on gendered roles within marriage, delineate women’s work as rudimentary and inferior compared to that of men. This helps explain why the lowest acceptable age of marriage for men/boys tends to be substantially higher than the lowest acceptable age for women/girls: according to the survey data, the most frequent response to the question “at what age is a person too young to marry,” was 20 years for boys, and 15 years for girls.

In sum, although participants did express disapproval of early marriage, however, this was defined in terms of being too young to take on the reproductive, sexual, social and economic work required within marriage. It should also be noted that, whilst participants across all three countries were generally of the view that child marriage (understood not necessary as marriage below 18 years, but rather, marriage below an appropriate stage of development) is, as a general idea, unacceptable or undesirable; they were often accepting of child marriage in particular circumstances. This is explored more fully in the following sections.

²³ Interview, NGO (Institute of Investigation for Special Data and Crimes), Cigudeg, Bogor, Indonesia.

²⁴ Focus Group Discussion, 9 girls, 15-17 years, Gazipur, Bangladesh.

²⁵ Interview, mother, 37 years, Cigudeg, Bogor, Indonesia.

Younger females have less choice about marriage

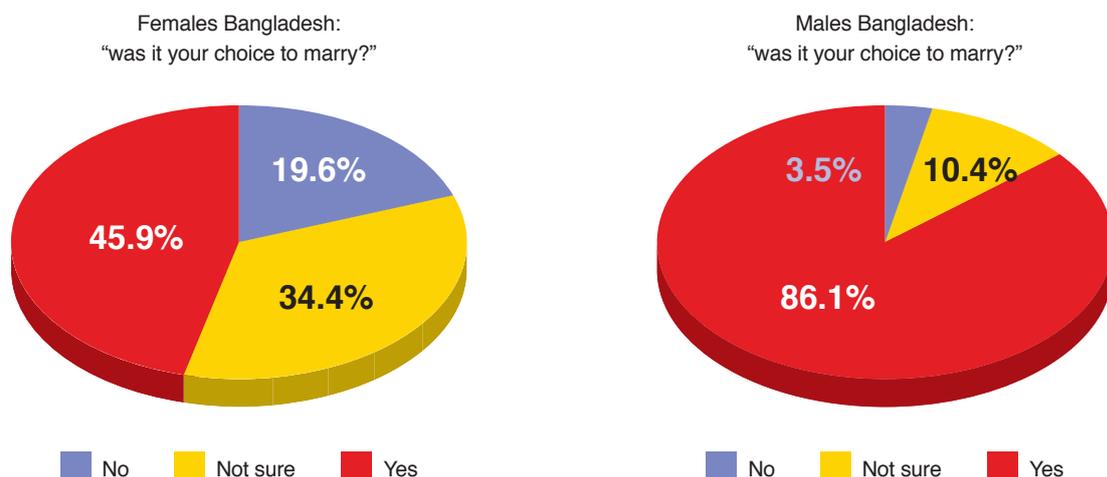
As well as collecting data on child marriage, the research was also designed to explore whether higher rates of child marriage (acceptability) are associated with a lack of agency, power and consent to marriage. In other words: is child marriage associated with forced marriage?

The research findings indicate that women and girls have considerably less choice and influence over decisions about who they marry or when they marry, compared to boys and men, which may be linked to significantly higher rates of child marriage of girls. As a participant in Bangladesh explained: “a male can influence the decision about his marriage. He can clearly say ‘no’ or ‘not this bride’. But commonly a female cannot influence the decision”.²⁶ According to participants in Pakistan, the lack of importance placed on consent, particularly that of girls, is often reflected in the marriage ceremony itself, where a bride may not even be formally asked if she accepts the groom as her husband: “I ask the boy if he is married by force; I do not ask this question from the girl.”²⁷

Findings from the interviews were supported by the quantitative survey data. Married respondents were asked a series of question about the timing of their marriage: ‘Was it your choice to get married at this time?’ ‘Did you feel pressured into marriage by any person in your family?’ ‘Did you feel any social pressure/pressure from society to get married at this time?’ There were significant and striking gender disparities in answers to these questions in Bangladesh and Pakistan,²⁸ demonstrating that men/boys experience greater decision-making power over when to get married and who to marry compared to women/girls.²⁹

ACCORDING TO PARTICIPANTS IN PAKISTAN, THE LACK OF IMPORTANCE PLACED ON CONSENT, PARTICULARLY THAT OF GIRLS, IS OFTEN REFLECTED IN THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY.

Figure 4: Choice about marriage by gender and country

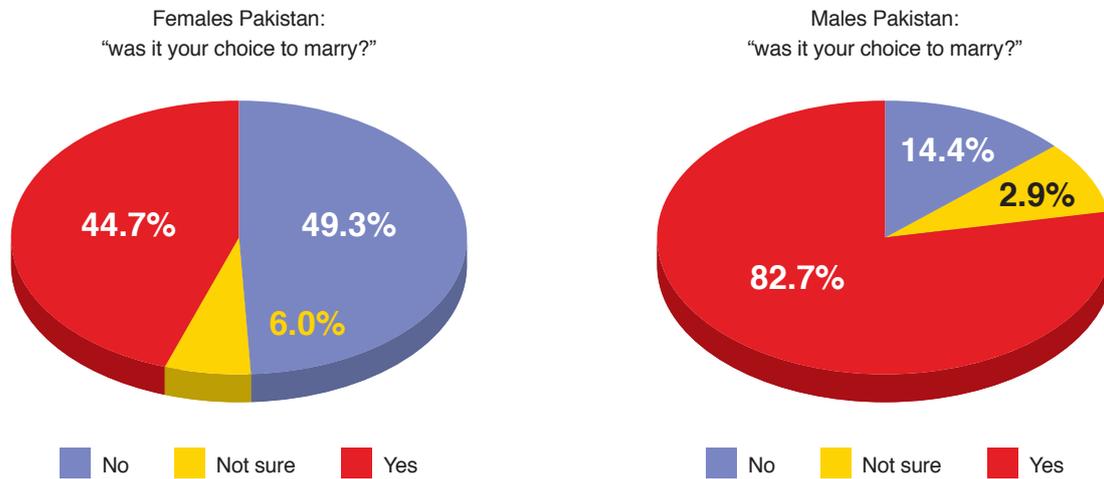


²⁶ Interview, boy, 15 years, Gazipur, Bangladesh.

²⁷ Interview, marriage officiate, Ranjanpur, Pakistan.

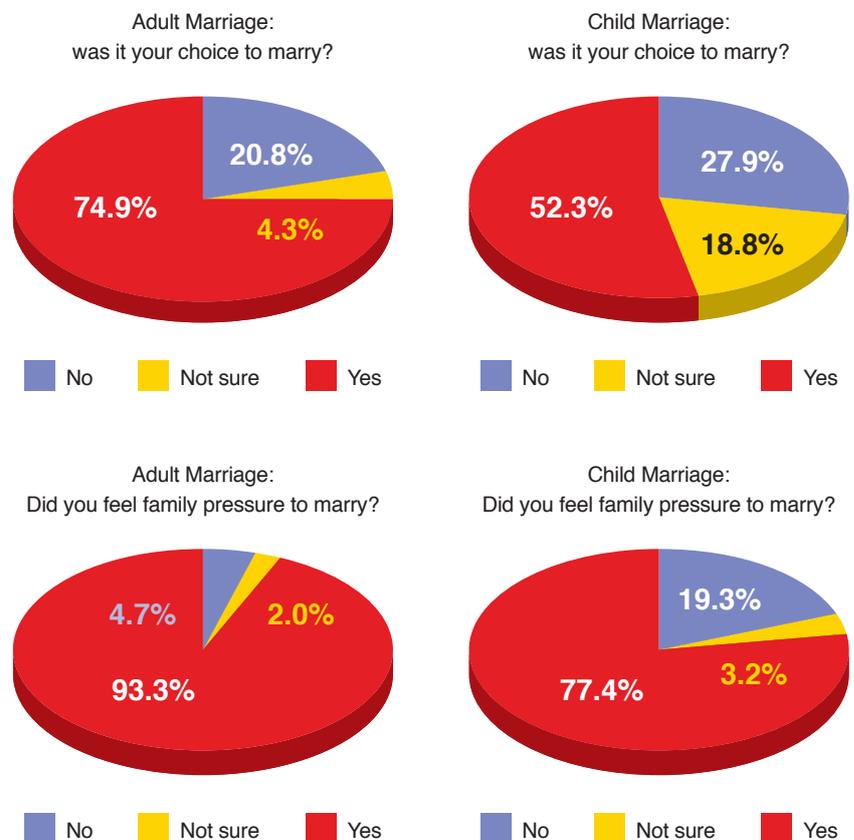
²⁸ The gender differentials in Indonesia on the other hand, were not significant; a much greater proportion of both female and male respondents in Indonesia felt that it was their choice to get married.

²⁹ Chi-square, $p < .01$.



Importantly, there was a significant differences in the responses of those who were married as adults to those who were married when they were children when they were asked about whether they were able to choose who to marry and when.³⁰ Children reported having less choice and experiencing greater pressure from their families to marry than adults. Participants consistently explained that a person’s age is highly related to the degree of power that they are able to exercise over who to marry and when and this is especially the case for boys; as a participant in Bangladesh explained: “the age of the bride and groom does matter. An older groom is able to influence parent’s decision more.”³¹

Figure 5: Decision making about marriage: child vs adult marriage



³⁰ Chi-square, p<.01.

³¹ Interview, boy, 14 years, Dinajpur, Bangladesh.

This demonstrates that a person married as a child is significantly less likely to have given consent to their marriage than a person married as an adult, which provides strong evidence of an association between child marriage and forced marriage.

Finally, decision making and agency within marriage are not only affected by a person's age or gender; education³² and wealth³³ are also of significance: "The extent to which [a person's] consent might be given importance depends on the age, level of education, and income. Consent of a less educated girl from poor family is often ignored."³⁴

Unpacking agency: parents tend to make decisions about marriage

The researchers collected quantitative data on social norms about decision-making and choice in relation to marriage. In all three countries, participants were more likely to agree with statements supportive of men/boys' agency with regard to decision-making about marriage compared to that of women/girls. For example, whilst 75.8% of participants in Pakistan agreed with the statement "boys should choose for themselves when to marry", this proportion reduced to 62.8% when the same question was asked about girls. Furthermore, whilst the overwhelming majority of participants in all three countries agreed that it was wrong to force anyone into marriage, there were proportionally fewer participants who agreed that a woman/girl should never be forced into marriage, than those who felt that a man/boy should never be forced.³⁵

Across all three countries the majority of respondents agreed both with the statement a person "should be able to choose for themselves when to marry", and with the statement that even if a person "does not want to marry they should honour the decisions and wishes of their family". They also overwhelmingly agreed that it was wrong to force anyone into marriage. In order to understand these apparent contradictions, it is necessary to examine how participants understand 'choice', and 'force' in relation to decision making about marriage.

Arranged marriages: Bangladesh and Pakistan

"In our society parents decide about the marriage of their children, and amongst the parents, the father has final power. The girls and boys do not disagree. If the boys and girls are older, then they might tell parents about their likes or dislikes, but they cannot reject the parents' decision."³⁶

Research findings suggest that in Bangladesh and Pakistan parents have considerable authority over who and when their children will marry. Parents regard themselves as having a duty to see that their children are married and settled. Failing to find a suitable match at the appropriate time is widely regarded as a deep failing of parental obligations: as one

³² Participants who had no education or only basic education were significantly less likely to say it had been their choice to marry, Chi-square, $p < .001$.

³³ Participants who said it was their choice to marry had significantly higher incomes, than those who said it was not their choice, T-test, $p < .01$.

³⁴ Interview, community leader, Dinajpur, Bangladesh.

³⁵ 90% of participants agreed for boys, compared to 86.8% who agreed for girls.

³⁶ Interview, father, 32 years, Ranjanpur, Pakistan.

PARENTS REGARD THEMSELVES AS HAVING A DUTY TO SEE THAT THEIR CHILDREN ARE MARRIED. FAILING TO FIND A SUITABLE MATCH AT THE APPROPRIATE TIME IS WIDELY REGARDED AS A DEEP FAILING OF PARENTAL OBLIGATIONS.



Sharina, 14 and Nazir, 17, Bangladesh. Their marriage was arranged by Sharina's father and Nazir's grandfather. She has been married for two years and now has a six-month-old daughter. (names have been changed to protect identities)

participant explained: “according to social customs and religious law, boys and girls should be married one day. It’s a major duty of parents. If not, we have to face social pressure and critiques. So it is parents’ responsibility to marry their daughter when she reaches puberty.”³⁷

As a result, even though a marriage is often carried out without the consent of the couple concerned, and whilst there may be a considerable degree of parental pressure and coercion applied, this is not typically regarded as problematic, even by children themselves. Rather, it is considered as part of the proper and natural order of things; as a group of boys explained: “We respect our elders, we stay silent in front of them; Marriage related things are decided by parents; Society gives them this right; and we will have this right, when we are parents.”³⁸ The decisions that parents make about marriage on their children’s behalf are understood as being for the benefit of the child, as well as (or even because of) the interests of the family as a collective.

IF A PERSON NEVER EXPECTS TO MAKE A DECISION FOR HERSELF... IT MAKES SENSE THAT FORCE IS NOT DEFINED AS PRESSURE, COERCION OR LACK OF CHOICE.

The passive and subordinate role of women and girls within social life renders them especially unlikely to contradict or challenge parental authority about marriage. In this context, the question of whether or not a female consents to marriage becomes almost irrelevant, because it is accepted that a girl would never contradict a decision that is not hers to make: “a boy has to give his consent [for marriage] but girls are not asked about their consent – because everyone knows that girls do not go against parents.”³⁹

The research revealed cases where a child has objected to their parents’ decisions about their marriage, but the findings demonstrate that in practice marriages chosen by the parents are very difficult to resist. The lack of power that girls have to resist an unwanted marriage, was reflected in some participants’ view that the only way to escape is through suicide.

³⁷ Focus Group Discussion, mothers, 24-39 years, Gazipur, Bangladesh.

³⁸ Focus Group Discussion, boys, 12 – 15 years, Rajanpur, Pakistan.

³⁹ Focus Group Discussion, boys, 15-18 years, Rajanpur, Pakistan.

The consequences of refusal, particularly for girls, can be extreme and severe. As one participant explained: “Marriages without the consent of the parents mostly happen when the girl and boy run away. But most of the time they either end up being captured by the police – and the girl handed over to the parents – or the girl is killed by the parents in the name of honour.”⁴⁰

In practice, therefore, although children and young people may have very little agency or choice in marriage, this does not mean the match will be regarded as a ‘forced marriage’. If a person never expects to make a decision for herself, or to have the opportunity to choose her own future based on personal judgment and desire, it makes sense that force is not defined as pressure, coercion or lack of choice. This helps explain why, despite the fact that there was general consensus amongst participants that forced marriage is objectionable, in practice children and young people often have no, or very limited choice, about when and who they will marry.

Hierarchy and decision-making power in non-arranged marriages: Indonesia

In Indonesia, arranged marriages are comparatively rare, with the data indicating that there is a higher level of acceptance that couples should decide for themselves when and whom to marry. Yet even in Indonesia, girls lack power in initiating marriages. There is a dominant and widespread expectation that marriage should be instigated by men/ boys and their families, and that girls should wait passively for a proposal, along with her parents’ acceptance.

Although children appear to have more choice about their marriage partner in Indonesia, and the timing of their marriage, parents still hold a considerable amount of power and influence over their children’s decisions. Participants in the research expressed substantial deference to their parents, explaining that if their parents wished for them to marry, they should do so, even if it went against their own personal wishes (this was especially the case for girls). Conversely, respondents also expressed the view that a marriage should not take place without parents’ consent, and that if it did, it would have to do so in secret. This result also emerged from survey data: 62.8% of participants in the survey agreed with the statement: “even if a girl does not want to be married she should honour the decisions and wishes of her family”, and 59.8% agreed with this statement for boys.

- ▶ In all countries there is a stage below which marriage of a child is considered unacceptable, but this is not always defined by a person’s age.
- ▶ Biological and physical indicators may signal that a child is ready for marriage, and this is especially the case for girls.
- ▶ The ideal age for marriage for males is higher than for females, because men are expected to take a leadership role within marriage, and are expected to have acquired education and wealth.
- ▶ Children, especially girls, have limited choice about marriage and this is considered normal and acceptable.

⁴⁰ Focus Group Discussion, boys, 12 – 15 years, Muzaffargaraf, Pakistan.

INDIVIDUALS WITH HIGHER INCOMES WERE FOUND TO BE LESS ACCEPTING OF CHILD MARRIAGE THAN THOSE WITH LOWER WAGES.

Structural factors that shape child marriage

Norms and practices relating to child marriage do not exist in isolation, they have a relationship with broader structural and environmental factors, such as the arrangement of social institutions, and the distribution of social, economic and political power. Understanding the nature of these relationships is critical to designing programming that can effectively change marriage practices in a sustainable way.

Poverty affects child marriage and its acceptability

“A girls’ parents always think about the groom’s economic status. A middle aged, opulent man can marry as he wishes.”⁴¹

Research findings suggest that **child marriage often occurs as a response to economic insecurity**. In all three countries, respondents reported that marrying a daughter to an economically secure man is a priority for families from deprived backgrounds; if an opportunity to do so arises, it is not to be missed, regardless of the age or wishes of the girl. For instance, during focus group discussions respondents were presented with a scenario where the parents of a 15-year-old girl want her to marry a wealthy 35-year-old man so that he can help them financially. Participants overwhelmingly expressed support for the marriage: in the words of one participant; “better for the girl to marry the old man, because there is no guarantee she can survive or get a better life by leaving home”.⁴²

The relationship between economic hardship and acceptability of child marriage is also demonstrated in the survey data.⁴³ Individuals with higher incomes were found to be less accepting of child marriage (they had lower child marriage acceptability scores) than those with lower incomes, who were conversely more accepting of child marriage.⁴⁴ There were also significant associations between respondents’ income levels and their explanation for why child marriage of girls happens; respondents with lower income were more likely to agree with the statements that ‘marrying girls at a young age can help resolve financial problems in the family’, and that ‘marrying girls at a young age can help provide them security’ than those with a higher income.⁴⁵

Girls’ economic dependency makes them particularly vulnerable to child marriage

Economic drivers have a particularly strong impact on attitudes and practices relating to the marriage of girls because girls are economic dependents. In all case study countries, the majority of women and girls depend upon men for their financial security. As previously discussed, this dependency is rooted in a gendered division of labour, according to which women are responsible for homemaking, child bearing and childcare, whilst men are responsible for providing income. The data

⁴¹ Interview, NGO, Gazipur, Bangladesh.

⁴² Focus ground discussion, 6 boys, 15-18, Babakan Madang, Bogor (Didi), Indonesia.

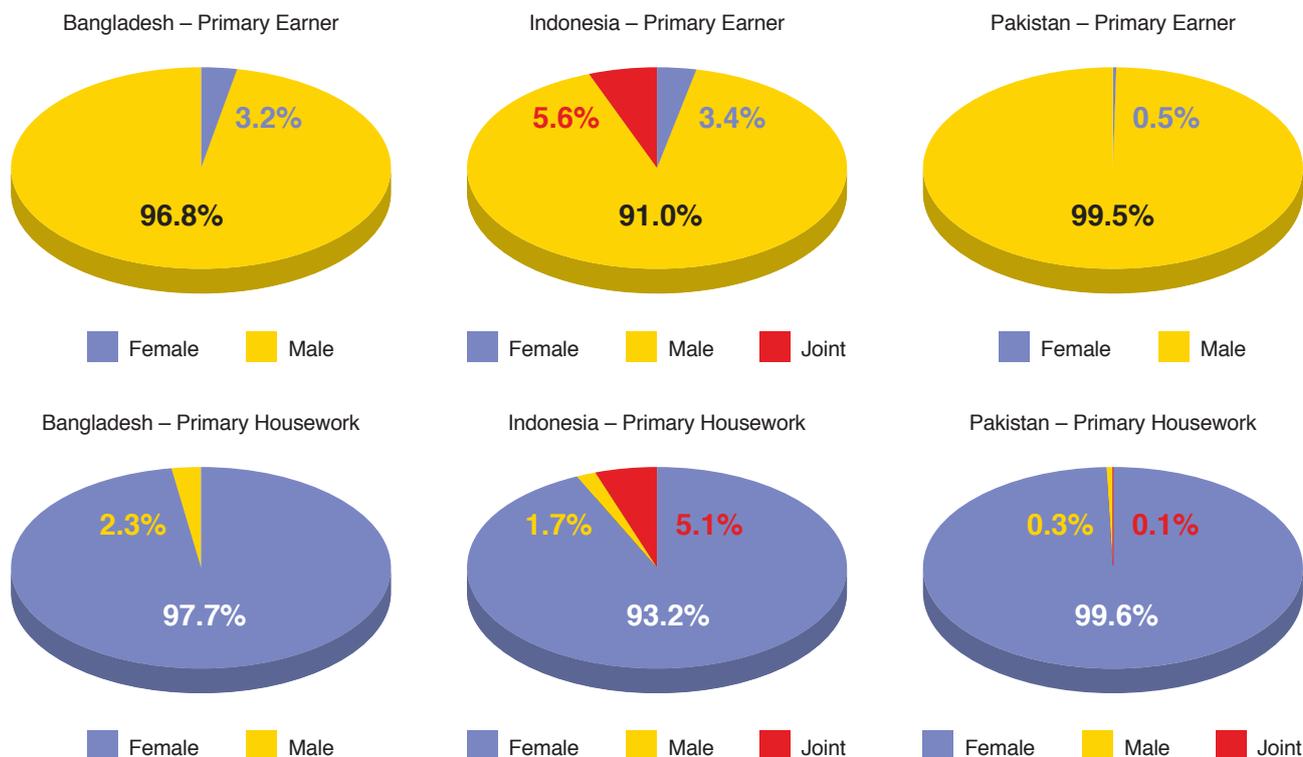
⁴³ There was a statistically significant negative correlations between respondents’ income level and their ‘child marriage acceptability scores in all three countries Bivariate correlation; Bangladesh: $R = -.083$, .05% significance level (2-tailed); Indonesia: $R = -.092$, .05% significance level (2-tailed); and Pakistan: $R = -.109$, .01% significance level (2-tailed).

⁴⁴ Bivariate correlation, $p < .05$ in Bangladesh and Indonesia, and $p < 0.1$ in Pakistan.

⁴⁵ T test, $p < .01$.

demonstrates extreme division of labour in all three countries, with the vast majority of respondents in each country naming a male family member as the 'primary earner' in their household, and naming a female family member as the person primarily responsible for housework.

Figure 6: Gendered divisions of labour



Given their role as economic dependents, marrying girls early is seen as essential to achieving their economic security. Child marriage of girls may also relieve a family of the burden of supporting a daughter. A son may be perceived as a potential future earner who will grow up to support his parents, whereas a girl will be transferred to her husband's family. As a Bangladeshi teacher explained, "At the age of 13/14, poor parents started thinking about marriage. Poor parents think girls are dependent. They will not get benefits from a daughter. Families expect more from boys, boys will feed them."⁴⁶

Many participants expressed the view that child marriage is an acceptable practice when it can shift the financial burden of caring for a girl onto another family. A focus group of girls in Indonesia expressed the social pressure that unmarried girls feel to marry, to avoid continuing to absorb their families' resources: "It is better to get married than become your parent's burden."⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, this driver appears to be more important where families have a greater number of children. According to survey data in all three countries, respondents from larger households were more likely to think that girls should be married younger, compared to those from smaller households. This was found to be especially true of adult, male respondents.⁴⁸

BETTER FOR THE GIRL TO MARRY THE OLD MAN, BECAUSE THERE IS NO GUARANTEE SHE CAN SURVIVE OR GET A BETTER LIFE BY LEAVING HOME.
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT IN INDONESIA

⁴⁶ Interview, teacher, Dinapur, Bangladesh.

⁴⁷ Focus Group Discussion, 5 girls, 15-18, Cigudeg, Bogor (Lanny), Indonesia

⁴⁸ The size of a respondents' household was found to be negatively correlated with their attitudes concerning the ideal age of marriage for girls, as well as their child marriage acceptability score (bivariate correlation, $p < .01$ in all three countries).

AN UNMARRIED GIRL IS REGARDED AS POSING A CONSTANT THREAT TO THE REPUTATION OF HER FAMILY.

Dowry creates economic incentives for early marriage of girls

In Pakistan and Bangladesh, the position of women/girls as a financial burden on their parents is entrenched through the system of dowry, by which the parents of the bride are expected to bestow property or money on their daughter when she is married, which will be transferred to her husbands' family. Younger girls often require a lower dowry as they are typically considered more desirable by men: about half of survey respondents in Pakistan and Bangladesh agreed with the statement that 'younger brides often require a lower dowry than older brides', and these findings were supported by evidence from the qualitative data.

In this context, families face significant economic pressures to marry their daughters young, particularly within poorer households. Doing so not only removes the financial cost of supporting her, it does so at a lower 'price' than will be obtainable as she ages. Meanwhile marriage provides a means for ensuring a daughter's future economic security; an outcome, which is critical given her financial dependency and the stigma she will face as an unmarried woman. In this way the dowry market and the way it functions reinforces the norm that early marriage provides protection for women/girls.

In sum, the institution of dowry was found to be both a direct and indirect driver of child marriage (acceptability); a direct driver in the sense that it provides rational economic incentives for early marriage practices, and indirect driver in the sense that it functions to undermine and devalue the social position of women and girls.

Male sexual violence and control of female sexuality drives child marriage

Social norms in all three countries, but particularly in Bangladesh and Pakistan, strictly prohibit sexual activity outside of marriage; meanwhile women and girls are held responsible if this norm is transgressed, irrespective of whether or not the girl took part in the sexual activity consensually. An unmarried girl is regarded as posing a constant threat to the reputation of her family; either because she might engage in a relationship prior to marriage, or because she is seen as being at risk of becoming a victim of sexual harassment or violence, which will be equally devastating to her reputation, and will damage her future opportunities for marriage. This creates considerable incentives for parents to marry their daughter at the earliest opportunity to secure her reputation and avoid social stigma.

As many as 61.2% of survey respondents in Pakistan, and 58.8% of participants in Indonesia agreed that marrying girls young can help prevent sexual violence, and 58% (Indonesia) and 53% (Pakistan) also agreed that early marriage of girls can help protect the family honour and reputation.

“One of the main reasons for early marriage is to protect the family from disrepute associated with immoral activities of the girl. Parents fear that before she has sex with someone they should marry her. She might make a bad name for her parents. Once she is married, the responsibility and burden is shifted.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Focus Group Discussion, gathers, 32-50 years, Rajanpur, Pakistan.

Given that any sexual activity outside of marriage is devastating for the reputation of a girl and her family, consensual sexual activity and sexual violence are often viewed as equally problematic, and marriage is seen as a potential solution to both. Participants in the qualitative research relayed stories of child marriages allegedly arranged as a remedy for sexual violence, harassment and rape, to avoid family shame.

In focus group discussions participants were presented with a hypothetical story about a 14-year-old girl who is raped on her way home from school. As a consequence her parents decide they should immediately marry her to an older man who already has a wife. Participants' reactions to this scenario were mixed, but many agreed that the girl should be married as soon as possible: "It is fine to get married instead of being unmarketable;" "it is better to get married than bearing the shame"; "it is not her fault, but nobody will believe it's not her fault" were typical responses.⁵⁰ Disturbingly some participants felt that the old man was doing the child a favour by agreeing to marry her even though she was a victim of rape, as one young girl in Indonesia explained: "the man is very kind and noble, because he knows about the [rape] and still wants to take responsibility [for the girl]."⁵¹

The link between sexual violence and early marriage, therefore, is mediated through attitudes that hold female victims of violence responsible for their own abuse; attitudes that normalise and justify male perpetration of violence against women and girls.⁵² The data consistently revealed evidence of such attitudes amongst participants in all three case study countries, particularly in Pakistan where almost a third (31.6%) of all male respondents agreed that a girl who dishonours her family should be physically beaten or punished.

Interestingly, in Pakistan and Bangladesh, survey respondents who were married as children reported that they had suffered significantly higher levels of intimate partner violence than those married as adults; providing evidence of an association between child marriage and violence against women and girls⁵³ Similarly, in all country contexts, participants who agreed with the statement "it is sometimes ok to physically beat or punish a girl if she dishonours her family", were found to have a significantly higher mean 'child marriage acceptability' scores, than those who disagreed with this statement;⁵⁴ indicating that those respondents who were more accepting of violence against women and girls, were also more accepting of child marriage practices.

IN PAKISTAN AND BANGLADESH, RESPONDENTS WHO WERE MARRIED AS CHILDREN REPORTED THAT THEY HAD SUFFERED SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER LEVELS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE THAN THOSE MARRIED AS ADULTS.

Access to sexual and reproductive health services reduces child marriage (acceptability)

The stigma associated with female sexuality, and prohibition on sexual relationships outside of marriage, is exacerbated by a lack of availability and access to sexual and reproductive health services particularly for young, unmarried women. Pregnancy before marriage was deeply

⁵⁰ Focus Group Discussion, girls, 12-13 years, Cigudeg, Bogor, Indonesia.

⁵¹ Focus Group Discussion, girls, 13-14 years, Babakan Madang, Indonesia. 61.2% of survey respondents in Pakistan, and 58.8% of participants in Indonesia agreed that marrying girls young can help prevent sexual violence, and 58% (Indonesia) and 53% (Pakistan) also agreed that early marriage of girls can help protect the family honour and reputation.

⁵² E Buchwald, *Transforming Rape Culture*, 2005.

⁵³ Chi-square, $p < .01$.

⁵⁴ ANOVA, $p < .001$. Mean acceptability score of 92.9 for those who agreed, 89.6 for those who were 'neutral', and 83.8 for those who disagreed.

THERE IS EVIDENCE OF A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IMPROVED ACCESS TO SRH SERVICES AND ATTITUDES THAT ARE LESS ACCEPTING OF CHILD MARRIAGE.

disapproved of across all the research sites. Participants regarded it as essential that any unmarried girl who became pregnant should be married immediately. Participants frequently expressed the view that pregnancy outside of marriage is an exception to the dominant view that forced marriages are unacceptable: "If the girl is pregnant, then the parent must force her into marriage. There is no other solution"⁵⁵.

According to the data, there is a lack of access to or availability of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services in all research sites, particularly for unmarried respondents, and those who have not yet had children. Over a quarter of participants in Pakistan reported that contraceptives are never available in their communities, as did 15.9% of participants in Indonesia. The rest of the sample in Pakistan and Indonesia reported that contraceptives are only available to individuals who are married or who already have children, as did 87.3% of respondents in Bangladesh.

Evidence from the qualitative data suggests that the lack of availability or practical access to SRH services for unmarried women is also due to the stigma associated with sex outside of marriage and this prevents service providers from delivering services to unmarried girls and women. Furthermore, once a woman or girl is married she may be expected to demonstrate her fertility by becoming pregnant shortly afterwards. As one participant explained: "People here do not use contraception after getting married, because they believe it will be difficult for the wives to get pregnant. They use contraception after having a child, either contraceptive injection or pills."⁵⁶

There appears to be a lack of knowledge, particularly amongst young women and girls, about SRH services and contraception more generally. It was reported by many respondents that sex and relationships education in schools is either non-existent, very minimal or of poor quality. Some participants in Bangladesh observed that Plan International and other NGOs have started to carry out some awareness raising in communities on SRH, including providing some sex education in schools. At present, it is unclear what impact this will have in improving access to SRH services.

Interestingly, married participants in the survey who reported using a modern form of contraception were found to be significantly less accepting of child marriage, than those reportedly not using contraception.⁵⁷ Furthermore, participants who were able to identify one or more modern forms of contraception available in their community had significantly lower child marriage acceptability scores than those who did not.⁵⁸ These findings are important because they provide evidence of a relationship between improved access to SRH services, and norms and attitudes that are less accepting of child marriage.

⁵⁵ Focus Group Discussion, parents, mixed gender, 25-60 years, Babakan Madang, Indonesia.

⁵⁶ Focus Group Discussion, parents, mixed gender, 25-60 years, Babakan Madang, Indonesia.

⁵⁷ ANOVA, $p < .001$

⁵⁸ ANOVA, $p < .001$

THERE IS A PREVAILING ATTITUDE THAT EDUCATION OF GIRLS IS NEITHER DESIRABLE NOR NECESSARY.

Education delays marriage

The quantitative data demonstrates a clear relationship between age of marriage and the number of years spent in education across all three case study countries.⁵⁹ Individuals who stay in education longer tend to get married later.⁶⁰ This relationship was stronger for female respondents than male respondents: every additional year that a girl stayed in education was associated with a proportionally larger delay in marriage (compared to boys).⁶¹ In research sites in all three countries there were also significant differences in the age of first marriage of females according to their parents' level of education. Female respondents' whose parents had some formal education were married significantly later than those whose parents' were uneducated.⁶²

The relationship between education and age of marriage was clearly articulated by respondents in focus group discussions and interviews. Many described the relationship as a 'trade-off', according to which a child can either be in education or be married, and this is especially the case for girls. If a girl gets married, it is highly unlikely that she will be able to continue her schooling, due to her responsibilities towards her husband and in-laws, and the convention that it is appropriate for her to remain at home. Boys, however, may continue in education. Interestingly, when asked about the typical age of marriage in their communities, both adults and children frequently reported two sets of ages: one for those who were going to remain in education and one for those who were not. Survey respondents in all countries overwhelmingly agreed that marriage under 18 years has a negative impact on education for both boys and girls.

Both qualitative and quantitative data suggests that child marriage interrupts the education of girls, yet the relationship between child marriage and lack of education for girls runs deeper. There is a prevailing attitude that education of girls is neither desirable nor necessary: women are expected to remain at home and take care of family and household work, and educating women may pose a challenge to maintaining appropriate social hierarchies within marriage.

Impact of education on the acceptability of child marriage

The survey data also revealed relationships between respondents' levels of education (as well as their parents' levels of education) and their acceptability of child marriage. For instance, in research sites in Bangladesh and Pakistan,⁶³ those respondents who had stayed in education longer were less accepting of child marriage, and participants who reported receiving 'no education' or only 'basic education' were significantly more accepting of child marriage than those who had (mainstream) formal schooling.⁶⁴ The data also revealed significant

⁵⁹ Analysis of data aggregated across the three countries revealed a positive relationship between the age of first marriage and years in school. Correlation coefficient = .285, significant at .01 level (2-tailed).

⁶⁰ Bi-variate correlation, $p < .01$. Positive correlations were also found in each individual country.

⁶¹ Female: correlation coefficient = .428, significant at .01 level (2-tailed); Male: correlation coefficient = .124, significant at .05 level (2-tailed).

⁶² T-test, $p < .01$ for Indonesia and Bangladesh, and $p < 0.10$ for Pakistan.

⁶³ There were significant negative correlations between adult respondents' 'child marriage acceptability scores' and their number of years spent in education: Bangladesh: correlation coefficient = .33, significant at .01 level (2-tailed); Pakistan: correlation coefficient = -.02, significant at .01 level (2-tailed).

⁶⁴ ANOVA, $p < .01$ across countries.

variances between the acceptability scores of respondents depending on their parents' level of education; respondents with parents who had 'no education' were significantly more accepting of child marriage than those with educated parents.⁶⁵

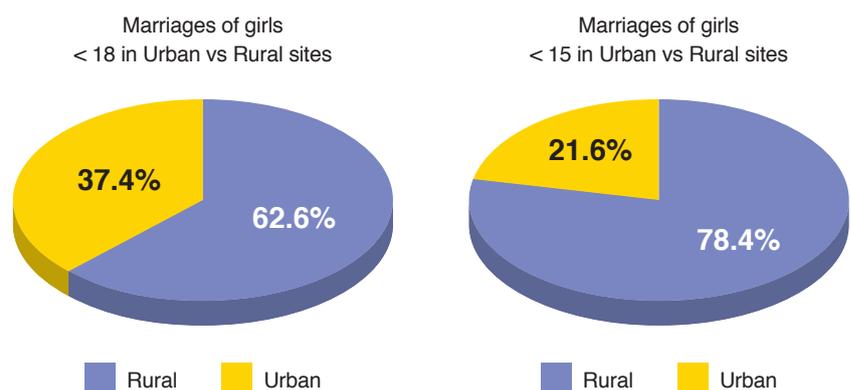
Child marriage occurs because of lack of opportunity

Finally, data suggests that marriage of children may be considered more acceptable in contexts where there are limited alternatives available, particularly in the form of education and/or employment: "here, if there are people who do not go to school and do not have any job...it is better for them to get married."⁶⁶ This is particularly relevant for girls, given that across the three research countries findings indicate that women and girls have access to fewer life opportunities than boys and men. 93.5% of respondents in Bangladesh, 72.5% in Indonesia, and 68.9% in Pakistan agreed with the statement: "marriage of girls under 18 years mostly happens because there is a lack of education and job opportunities".

Lack of alternatives to marriage are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where education and employment opportunities are more limited; as a group of parents in Pakistan noted: "in urban areas, people might be thinking of children's education and jobs, but here these things do not exist; girls and boys do not get education that is why they consider to marry their children as soon as possible."⁶⁷ The differences between early marriage practices and acceptability in urban and rural contexts is most clearly illustrated by data from research sites in Pakistan, (as opposed to Bangladesh and Indonesia, where the differences in rurality between the research sites were more subtle). 62.6% of the respondents married under 18 years were living in rural areas as against 37.4% in urban areas.⁶⁸ The differences are even greater in relation to children married under the age of 15 years, with over three quarters, 78.4% of respondents living in rural areas.

LACK OF ALTERNATIVES TO MARRIAGE ARE PARTICULARLY PRONOUNCED IN RURAL AREAS, WHERE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES ARE MORE LIMITED.

Figure 7: Rates of child marriage in rural vs urban areas in Pakistan⁶⁹



⁶⁵ ANOVA, $p < .05$ across countries, except that there was no significant relationship found between respondents *father's* education type and child marriage acceptability in Indonesia, but there was a relationship with the type of education of the mother.

⁶⁶ Interview, marriage registrar, religious affairs office, Babakan Madang, Indonesia.

⁶⁷ Focus group discussion, fathers, 32-50 years, Rajanpur, Pakistan.

⁶⁸ Significant at .01 level.

⁶⁹ Proportions have been weighted to equalise the sample.

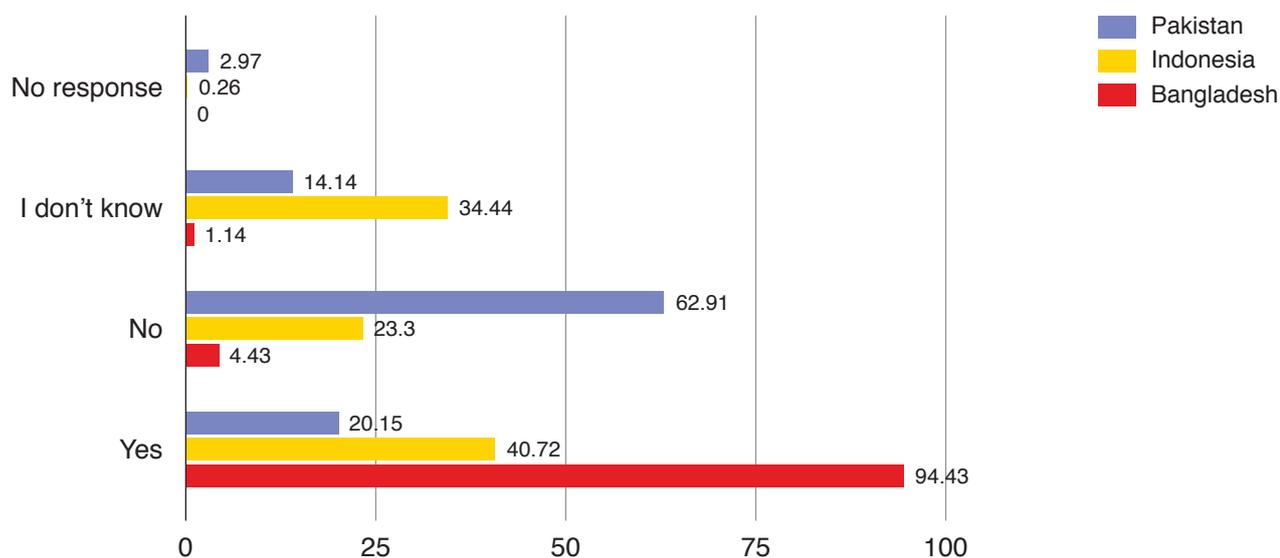
There were also significant differences between the levels of child marriage acceptability in the rural sites compared to the urban site in Pakistan, with respondents in rural areas reporting higher levels of child marriage acceptability.

Legal frameworks are rarely enforced

National legal frameworks establish a minimum statutory age of marriage in all three research sites: in Bangladesh, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929⁷⁰ establishes the minimum age at 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys; in Indonesia, the Law on Marriage 1974 sets the minimum age of marriage at 16 for girls and 19 for boys (parental consent is required for marriages taking place where one or both parties is under the age of 21 years);⁷¹ and, in Pakistan, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 sets the minimum statutory age of marriage at 16 for girls and 18 for boys.⁷²

As illustrated by the graph below, survey data clearly indicates that knowledge of the legal minimum age of marriage was much stronger in the Bangladesh research sites than in the research sites in Indonesia and Pakistan; not only did participants report to know that there was a legal minimum age but they were more likely to identify the age correctly than in either Indonesia or Pakistan. This result is perhaps unsurprising, given that Bangladesh research sites had received more sensitisation messaging relating to child marriage. Yet it is also paradoxical, given that the research sites in Bangladesh were found to have a significantly higher proportion of child marriages than the other two countries. This finding implies that knowledge of the law in Bangladesh is failing to have much impact on child marriage practices, at least on short term.

Figure 8: Knowledge of the Statutory Minimum Age of Marriage



⁷⁰ Section 2, *Child Marriage Restraint Act* (1929).

⁷¹ Article 7, *Law on Marriage* (1974).

⁷² In Pakistan, legal regulation of marriage has been devolved to the Provincial level, and a number of bills which would raise the minimum age of marriage have been proposed. In Punjab province, where this study took place, however, no new legal provisions have been passed at the provincial level, and national legislation still applies.

**SOMETIMES I HAVE TO
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COMMUNITY LEADER IN BANGLADESH**

Respondents emphasised the inconsistency between law and practice; many correctly identified the legal age of marriage, reported that 'people are well informed' about the law, and went on to explain that 'State law' is failing to prevent the occurrence of child marriage effectively. This finding suggests that programmatic approaches that focus on 'sensitisation' about legal standards, without addressing underlying causal factors, are likely to have only a limited impact on practice.

Registration of marriage

In all three countries, there are legal requirements to register a marriage with the Government appointed civil registrar. This is intended to provide a mechanism for enforcing the statutory minimum age of marriage. Survey data suggests that the rate of officially registered marriages is highest in the Indonesia research sites, where 94.2% of married respondents reported having an official 'government registered' marriage. By contrast, in Bangladesh research sites, less than a third (30.95%) of married respondents reported having a government registered marriage, and in Pakistan research sites, less than half (46.74%) of married respondents reported having a government registered marriage.

Qualitative data indicates that registration requirements are not preventing the occurrence of underage marriages. Rather, where one of the parties is under-age, marriage may still take place but without formal, civil registration. In addition, the data suggests that in many instances those responsible for marriage registration overlook or fail to investigate whether one or both of the parties is under the legal minimum age of marriage. In all three countries, respondents mentioned cases where marriage officiators registered under-age marriages with the use of false documents or did not require parties to prove their age. For instance, in Pakistan, while marriage registrars are reportedly unconcerned with age verification, they record false ages in order to be seen as compliant with the law: "The Nikahkhan did not ask me about my age; he just recited versus from the Quran, had prayers and put his signature on the register; then he gave us a copy from the register; no one asked me about my national ID or birth certificate. But Nikahkhan said that the boy's age should be written as 18 years and girls age should be written 16 years."⁷³

Officials described taking a flexible attitude toward law enforcement in order to navigate the incompatible priorities of enforcing the minimum statutory age of marriage, and maintaining popular legitimacy in a context where marriage below the legal age is seen to be acceptable or even desirable. As put by a Bangladeshi community leader, "Of course I pose a barrier to a marriage taking place when someone intends to marry below the minimum legal age...It is not legal [to marry below this age] - as a member I could not ignore when someone disobeys the law. However, sometimes I have to think about my vote bank. Breaking any marriage makes the guardian unhappy, and that affects voting."⁷⁴

⁷³ Interview, boy married at 13/14, 16/17 years, Rajanpur district, Pakistan.

⁷⁴ Interview, male local government leader, Dinapur district, Bangladesh.



While marriage officiates may be taking steps to comply with the law (at least on paper), penalties for registering under-age marriages do not appear to be enforced. This was found to be the case across the research sites: as stated by a respondent in Indonesia, “There is a law on this matter [prescribing a minimum age for marriage], but there is no consequence for violating this law.”⁷⁵ It is interesting to note that in both Bangladesh and Indonesia, the proportion of ‘child marriages’ that were government registered was not significantly different from the proportion of ‘adult marriages’ that were ‘government registered’. By comparison the proportion of child marriages that respondents reported to be government registered (37.2%), and adult marriages reported to be government registered (50.3%) is significantly different in Pakistan.⁷⁶ This may be due to the fact that in Pakistan, child marriage rates were significantly higher in rural sites, where official registration rates appear to be lower.

Musri's parents, in Indonesia, wanted her to marry at 15 but as she was involved in Plan International's Because I am a Girl campaign she was able to change her parents' minds about her marriage.

- ▶ Attitudes and norms about child marriage are shaped by environmental factors.
- ▶ Poverty, female economic dependency, the institution of dowry, male sexual violence, insufficient sexual and reproductive health services, and lack of access to education and other opportunities are all found to be associated with prevalence of child marriage and its acceptability.

⁷⁵ Interview, health worker (doctor), Cigudeg, Bogor (Lanny), Indonesia.

⁷⁶ Chi-square, $p < .001$.

APPLYING THE EVIDENCE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research provides detailed evidence and analysis concerning child marriage practices, the social attitudes, values and norms that shape these practices, and the underlying structural and environmental factors that influence them, in selected sites in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan.

The study found that rates of child marriage are relatively high in all research sites (particularly in sites in Bangladesh); that child marriage of girls is much more prevalent and acceptable than child marriage of boys; and that children (especially girls) tend to lack agency and decision making power over when and whom they marry.

These patterns appear to be driven by a number of interrelated factors, which explain some of the root causes of child marriage acceptability and practice:

- ▶ **Gender:** Child marriage practices, and the acceptability of child marriage, relates directly to ideas, norms and hierarchies that define different roles for men and women, including within marriage, and assign unequal value to these. Female identities and roles are defined primarily in terms of the sexual and reproductive functions of the body, and are seen as inferior to male identities and roles, which are defined through leadership, responsibility, intellect, and authority. In other words, it is not only people's specific ideas about when and at what age a girl should marry that are significant, but also their ideas about marriage, gender and power much more broadly.
- ▶ **Economic inequality:** Practices and attitudes concerning age and marriage are heavily influenced by the arrangement of economic relations, including income inequality, the financial dependency of women and girls, and the institution of dowry. Together these arrangements create powerful and rational financial incentives for the early marriage of girls, especially within poorer households.
- ▶ **Education and opportunity:** lack of education and other opportunity is a significant driver of child marriage. Prolonging education of girls, in particular, is associated with a delay in their marriage.
- ▶ **(Male) sexual violence:** Child marriage practices, and their acceptability, are associated with the widespread normalisation and justification of male violence against women and girls. The acceptability of early marriage of girls is informed by patriarchal norms that insist on male dominance and control over female sexuality. Marriage is perceived as a remedy for the stigma associated with female sexual experience outside of marriage, including in the context of sexual harassment, abuse and rape. Furthermore, forced marriage, which implies the arranged rape of a woman or girl (supported by her family) was found to be significantly associated with child marriage.
- ▶ **Access to SRH services:** Use of modern contraceptives, and knowledge and information about sexual and reproductive health is associated with reduced acceptability of child marriage. Unintended pregnancy is also a significant driver of both child and forced marriage.
- ▶ **Legal frameworks:** The existence, and knowledge of the existence, of a minimum statutory legal age of marriage does not appear to be associated with a reduction in child marriage practices, at least in the short term. Child marriages may be completed without legal registration, or through the use of falsified information or documents, and intervention to enforce legal rules is rare. Nevertheless, the law remains relevant in terms of its function as a normative force; evidence from both qualitative and quantitative data suggests that people are inclined to consider and refer to legal norms when forming ideas about when marriage is considered desirable and appropriate.

This evidence and analysis, which provides insight into the underlying drivers of child marriage practices, and the attitudes that sustain them, is crucial for developing effective programming for eradicating child marriage in the long term.

Recommendations

The following recommendations address indicators that were found to have a relationship to attitudes and practices concerning child marriage. Recommendations are divided into six main areas of activity: **addressing poverty** and lack of opportunity (particularly for girls); **improving** (access to) **education**; promoting community safety and **ending** impunity for **violence** against women and girls; increasing access to **sexual and reproductive health** rights and services; **strengthening law** and institutional frameworks to respond to child marriage; and, improving sensitisation/**messaging** on child marriage and gender equality. The recommendations within each key area are structured according to Plan International Asia's Programme Framework and Theory of Change on child marriage. This is to ensure that the recommendations are tightly tied to Plan International programming structures and processes and are therefore more easily 'actionable'. Recommendations include institutional level actions; community and family level actions; and individual level actions.

Addressing poverty and lack of opportunity (particularly for girls):

► Institutional level actions

- Advocate for the adoption of a law banning the institution of dowry (Pakistan).
- Conduct awareness-raising among law enforcement officials about the legal prohibition of dowry (Bangladesh).

► Community and family level actions

- Create links with existing vocational training centres and employment centres and advocate for them to prioritise the delivery of programmes and support to girls/women.
- Develop further accredited non-formal education and training opportunities in the communities and support to access income earning programmes.

► Individual level actions

- Support girls and their families or engage in existing village savings schemes (savings groups) and training programmes to improve girls' and women's capacity to save financial resources.
- Support girls and women in setting up businesses (e.g. provide 'mentors' in the business community to assist to develop skills/establish business; encourage loans to women and girls).

Improving (access to and retention of) education:

► Institutional level actions

- Advocate with district and local government officers to ensure that existing government 'safety net' programmes (scholarships and other financial educational support, free non-formal education opportunities, income support, etc.) are targeted at girls (and the families of girls) in need.
- Work with the Ministry of Education at district level to set targets for enrolment rate of girls in primary and secondary schools and ensure that schools meet quality indicators to ensure retention. School that can show they meet enrolment targets and key quality indicators should be rewarded.

- Establish links between schools and non-school settings (e.g. youth and community groups) to existing support structures for girls who are identified as being at risk of child marriage to see whether activities could be offered by these groups within schools and communities.

► **Community and family level actions**

- Engage men and boys to take actions against child marriage using peer-to-peer methodologies.
- Engage with PTA groups and carry out capacity building to improve their capacity to advocate against child marriage within schools and the community, and among their peers.
- Work with schools and local employers to determine relevant skills and knowledge for improving girls' employability. Work with schools to devise learning programmes/modules/resources to provide girls with education and training to enable them to access the employment market.
- Work with schools and employers to establish apprenticeship schemes for girls who stay at school until the end of secondary school.

► **Individual level actions**

- Create adolescent girls empowerment groups through safe spaces in schools and the community. These groups could support girls, using a peer-to-peer methodology, to develop skills such as financial literacy, life skills, sexual health knowledge, and information on how girls can report risks of child marriage and other forms of violence.

Promoting community safety and addressing impunity for violence against women and girls:

► **Institutional level actions**

- Work with stakeholders (schools, police, child protection and social welfare authorities) to carry out a risk audit of violence in schools and develop a strategy for preventing and responding to violence in schools and communities.
- Assist stakeholders in implementing a set of community safety and protection measures (e.g. ensuring there is adequate lighting near schools, organising parents to escort their children to and from school, encouraging peer support and establish community surveillance groups etc.).
- Advocate for and assist the Government at the national level to develop a rigorous corrective education curriculum (that works to address damaging gender norms), from early childhood through all educational levels.
- A pre-service curriculum for teachers to sensitise them and equip them with the skills to teach children about child rights, harmful gender stereotypes, violence, sexual harassment and child marriage could be developed and integrated into pre-service teacher training curriculum.
- Encourage and assist schools to develop a zero tolerance policy of the use of violence and sexual behaviour in schools to apply to both pupils and staff. Children should participate in setting the policy and the sanctions for inappropriate behaviour.
- Work with community based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs) or PTAs to build their capacity to deliver parenting classes to parents in the communities and incentivise parents to attend. Parenting classes should focus on how to teach sons what is acceptable social and sexual behaviour, on promoting the value of girls and on managing behaviour of children.

- ▶ Capacity building should be carried out with law enforcement officials at the district and sub-district level in handling cases of sexual violence, in order to ensure accountability for perpetrators and encourage reporting.

▶ **Community and family level action**

- ▶ Carry out sensitisation and outreach work in schools to educate boys and girls about laws relating to violence and the consequences of committing acts of violence against women and girls.
- ▶ Community sensitization efforts should include messaging to sensitise the public on the unacceptability of any form of sexual harassment or violence against girls and that such behaviour is will be punished in line with the legal regulatory framework.
- ▶ Engage boys and young men in awareness raising and advocacy campaigns against child marriage. This could be carried out using peer-to-peer methodologies.
- ▶ Select role models at individual, family and community level to advocate against child marriage.

▶ **Individual level actions**

- ▶ Consider setting up a project with local legal NGOs, or working with community based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs), to ensure that girls who are victims of sexual violence have access to justice.

Increasing access to sexual and reproductive health rights and services:

▶ **Institutional level actions**

- ▶ Link to and support existing advocacy and programming efforts (e.g. UNICEF, UNESCO, UNFPA) aimed at the introduction and development of comprehensive sex and relationships education in the compulsory school curriculum.
- ▶ Develop gender-sensitive youth friendly health clinics in project areas.
- ▶ Develop a system for disseminating information on sexual health to young people on a confidential basis.
- ▶ Advocate for the reform of laws that impose barriers on access to SRH services.
- ▶ Advocate with governments to ensure that children born outside of wedlock are legally able to be registered and have the same access to documentation, education and other services as children born within marriage.

Strengthening law and institutional frameworks to respond to child marriage:

► Institutional level actions

- Advocate for the reform of the Child Marriage Restraint Act to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 years for both boys and girls in all provinces (Pakistan).
- Carry out capacity building of relevant stakeholders (police, marriage registration bodies, religious leaders and marriage officiates), which increases knowledge of the statutory minimum age of marriage and work with the stakeholders to ensure implementation of the law.
- Work with stakeholders and district level government to improve monitoring systems of marriage registrars (civic and religious), to ensure that child marriages are not registered and validity of such marriages is denied.

Recommendations on sensitisation/messaging on child marriage:

► Community and family level actions

- It is critical that sensitisation messages about the negative impacts of child marriage do not reinforce socially dominant gender identities and roles, which are associated with inequalities between men and women, including within marriage. For example messaging may include information about the negative health impacts of early childbirth; and the negative consequences of girls assuming an important role in the family for which they are not sufficiently mature/educated. However, caution would need to be exercised to ensure that this messaging does not reinforce the idea that women's/ girls' role within marriage can be reduced to their ability to fulfil sexual and reproductive roles. Priority must be given to messaging that reinforces the full personhood, and agency of women and girls, on a basis of equality with men.
- Messaging in community sensitisation actions should promote the importance of education and the positive contribution that an educated and/or economically independent woman can make to a marriage and to a family in assisting in income generating and other activities.
- Community messaging should promote the message that marriage involves responsibility, and that it is important for boys and girls to be sufficiently mature, financially responsible and to have completed at least primary education before getting married.
- Community messaging should focus on the stress that marriage can have on a young couple who are not sufficiently mature to cope with the demands of adult life and how this can lead to marital breakdown and poor parenting.



- Plan International could recruit respected community leaders who are parents in the community (or work through the CBCPMs) to carry out peer-messaging to parents about the negative impacts of child marriage and the importance of delaying marriage until both parties are sufficiently mature.
- Plan International should aim community sensitisation at religious structures who appear to be highly significant in influencing the views of parents and children.

Rubi, Bangladesh. When she was 15, Rubi's parents arranged for her to be married. Rubi knew the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh was 18, and went to Plan International's partner organisation, her high school friends and school teacher. After several visits and discussions, local officials spoke to Rubi's parents about the legal implications of underage marriage and convinced them to abandon the arrangements.

Future Directions

The recommendations stemming from the research will guide the development of specific programmatic interventions under the Asia Child Marriage Initiative. Plan International will continue to support countries to raise funds towards the fight against child marriage and will work with government authorities and communities to ensure the eradication of early and forced marriage.

In addition, Plan International will give priority to working with marginalised children, including girls, children with disabilities and children from ethnic minorities, and will ensure that children have equal opportunities to participate in Asia Child Marriage Initiative programming.

The office of Plan International in Asia will continue to promote the Asia Child Marriage Initiative on global and regional platforms by coordinating with UN agencies and other key partners (such as, amongst others, Girls Not Brides) in order to build the capacity of governments and communities to eradicate child marriage at all levels.



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November 2015