

Social attitudes that view female child marriage as a means of protecting respectability need to change

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*Drawing on their extensive research of female child marriage in Bangladesh, **M Niaz Asadullah** and **Zaki Wahhaj** discuss the limitations of current deliberations over the minimum age of marriage law. They write that improving the agency of adolescent girls to make their own life choices should help reduce the incidence the child marriage more effectively than what can be achieved with legislative reform alone.*

Child marriage is a global problem affecting [15 million girls](#) every year. The practice severely limits the life choices available to adolescent girls and there is a growing consensus within the international community that it has far-reaching consequences for themselves, their families and their communities. United Nations' General Assembly Committee of 193 nations [passed a resolution](#) in November 2014 asking all member countries to pass and enforce laws banning child marriages. Some member countries have responded promptly to the call by adopting new laws.

However, during the same period, the government of Bangladesh has been contemplating a move that would [permit girls to marry at 16 with parental consent](#) and/or approval from courts. If the law is passed, it would mark the first occasion that girls are legally permitted to marry below the age of 18 in the Indian subcontinent since the "[Child Marriage Restraint Act](#)" came into effect in 1929.

Bangladesh has one of the [highest rates of female child marriage](#) anywhere in the world. According to a [recent estimate](#), 39% of Bangladeshi girls are married before they are 15, 74% before they are 18. In the past three decades, Bangladesh has made [significant progress](#) towards achieving gender equality in some important areas: girls and boys have nearly equal chances of entering secondary school today, and rural women have seen income-earning opportunities expand thanks to training and support services from the government and other organisations. Over the same period, while marriage among girls below 14 has declined, the incidence of marriage among [16 and 17 year-olds has actually increased](#).

The present deliberations of the Bangladesh government regarding child marriage law reflects the contradictory pressures that exist, when women and children's rights are concerned, in a developing country with patriarchal traditions. During the last three years, we have been researching the issue of female child marriage, together with colleagues at BRAC University, Bangladesh. Since the beginning of our [project](#), we have spoken directly to women who have experienced child marriage, and adolescent girls faced with the prospect, discussed the subject with high-level government officials, and developed and analysed a large-scale database on the life-choices of over 7,000 women. Our work has generated new evidence on the adverse consequences of early marriage of women on the [education of their children](#) and their own attitudes towards [gender bias](#). It has also given us a unique perspective on the dilemma on child marriage law that the Bangladesh government is faced with.



Conducting the Women's Life Choices and Attitudes Survey. Photo provided by author.

There is a law mandating a legal minimum age of marriage in Bangladesh, set at 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys. However, the current law is [frequently ignored and rarely enforced](#). A new draft legislation on child marriage, currently being reviewed by the Bangladesh government, would introduce harsher punishment for forcing children into marriage – increasing the financial penalty, and extending the maximum period of imprisonment from two months to two years. At the same time, the draft bill has a [special provision](#) stipulating that “under special circumstances, marriage of 16-year-old girls to men above 21 years, with permission of parents or courts, would not be considered as ‘child marriage’”. At a recent meeting with the press, the Bangladesh State Minister for Women and Children’s Affairs, Meher Afroz Chumki, explained that the special provision in the draft bill can help ‘tackle elopement and unwanted pregnancies’.

The draft bill currently under consideration is only the latest embodiment of continued effort by the Bangladeshi lawmakers to address this – imagined or real – social problem. In 2014, a bill to [lower the legal minimum age of marriage](#) for women outright from 18 to 16 was introduced in parliament and withdrawn shortly after following strong opposition from international organisations and local activists. [Bangladeshi human rights](#) activists have argued that, if the present bill is approved, it would enable parents to forcibly marry off girls as young as 14; and undermine their decade-long efforts to prevent the marriage of girls before 18.

We believe that the repeated attempts to amend the existing law reflects a genuine concern by the Bangladesh government about the social challenges caused by the practice of child marriage and the laws governing such marriage. At the July [2014 Girl Summit](#) in London, the government made a commitment to revise the “Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929” by 2015 and eradicate marriage by girls below the age of 15 by 2021, which places it under pressure from the international community to act on this issue. At the same time, as an MP explained to us at a [symposium on child marriage](#) organised at a private university in Dhaka last year, they are compelled to consider giving legal recognition to the marriage of girls under 18 because of pressures from parents in rural areas demanding a solution to the ‘problem’ of out-of-wedlock childbirth and the elopement of underage daughters.

To have a coherent response to these contradictory pressures, it is important to reflect on the root cause of the parental anxiety which underlie these demands. According to traditional patriarchal norms, which remains very strong in rural Bangladesh today, a family’s sense of ‘honour’ is intimately tied to the perceived ‘purity’ of their daughters and brides. It is a social setting where the [reputation of an unmarried adolescent girl](#) needs to be carefully protected because its loss severely limits her life choices. And so, especially for poor rural parents, early marriage presents itself as a pre-emptive measure or a solution to a perceived ‘crisis’ that may undermine the social position of their adolescent daughters.

With an increasing number of adolescent girls attending secondary school in rural areas and working in the industrial sector, there is perhaps greater parental anxiety they will encounter situations where they may be taken advantage of by men, pressured into sexual relationships or persuaded to elope.

But how real is this threat? As part of our project regarding female child marriage, we conducted [a nationwide survey of over 7,500 married women](#) aged between 20 and 39 years living across Bangladesh. About 83% of the married women in our study had their marriages arranged by their parents or other relatives. In response to the question ‘what was the most important reason for the marriage?’, 72% answered that their ‘parents felt it was too good a proposal to refuse’. Only 14% of women in our sample met their husbands without arrangement by their parents. This proportion is rising rapidly among younger women but brides who marry by their own initiative are prone to marry at an older age, more likely to attend secondary school and less likely to experience early childbirth.

We also conducted 87 in-depth interviews with girls who have recently left, or are currently enrolled, in secondary school. Overwhelmingly, their response to questions regarding their desires and aspirations was about continued education with the aim having a career in the service sector. They had little notion of what married life would entail, let alone mention it as a goal for the near future.

These figures and responses contrast sharply with the narrative of increased elopement and out-of-wedlock childbirth among adolescent girls. It suggests that parental initiative is the main driver behind early marriage – a pre-emptive measure against the potential evils of society to which that they imagine that their daughters will otherwise be exposed. By contrast adolescent girls, if they had greater agency in their life choices, would study further, marry later, and engage in work outside of the home – all choices consistent with greater gender equality within the society.

Our findings and reasoning suggests that the Bangladeshi government will find it impossible to satisfy both their rural constituency and human rights activists simply by reforming child marriage law. The social attitude that views the marriage of adolescent girls as a means of protecting their respectability needs to change. In the 1980’s and early 1990’s, when the education sector exhibited a significant gender gap in schooling, the government was able to [shift the prevailing social norms against female schooling](#) by running an effective information campaign, lowering the cost of schooling for girls and increasing the number of female school teachers in rural areas who could serve as role models.

If a campaign along similar lines today is able to shift the social norms regarding early marriage, then the parental pressures that the government is facing should decline naturally. And improving the agency of adolescent girls to make their own life choices should help reduce the incidence the child marriage more effectively than what can be achieved with legislative reform alone.

Note: The authors are co-investigators in a project on “The Role of Secondary Schooling and Gender Norms in the Long-term Opportunities and Choices of Rural Bangladeshi Women,” funded by the Australian Development Research Award Scheme.

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