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Marital Trend of Female Students during COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh: A Causal Analysis

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Abstract

This study, is aimed to delineate the most recent matrimonial tendencies of female students during the lockdown period of Bangladesh. Since the theme is absolutely a new phenomenon to be explored by maintaining ethical concern in academic research, this article is deemed to contribute as a fundamental investigation. The study, in first instance claims that the inclination of female marriage is a causal effect of Covid-19. A mixed method is being followed in this study to unfold the causal variables behind the fact of the theme. The study is an empirically observational exploration, which mainly delineated a triadic sources of data and information viz, qualitative, quantitative and observational. It could be noted that the COVID-19 is a new pandemic, hence secondary data is insufficient. Thus, a substantial number of primary, secondary and observational data and information along with new real/normal life experience have been placed in this very recent thematic article. The Covid-19 is a worldwide lesson for all human beings irrespective of color, sex, creed, religions, ethnicity, racial and even national identity. There is no boundary and limit of horizontal boundary of Covid-19. It crossed all over the world without any schedule of time bound directions. Unfortunately, the pandemic already took away a total of 28,028 lives from Bangladesh (as of 12th December 2021) and total 5.31 million from the world during the same period. As we all are concerned that Bangladesh is over populated, moreover this early marriage would even create more causal complications within the next couple of years. This study found that a substantial number of factors instigated to both parents and new couples to live together by getting marriage instead of staying at least 6 feet away from each-other during the unsafe period of Covid-19, prescribed by the WHO.

Key Words: Marital Inclination, Female Students, COVID-19, Pandemic, Cause and Effect, Child Marriage, Early Marriage, Female Education.

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Introduction

The most downwind effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is a sharp increase of 'child marriage[1]'. Child marriage is often practiced to protect the physical security of girls, marriage at young ages can pose multiple threats to young girls' lives, health, and future prospects (UNFPA, 2009; WHO, 2015). The most devastating one is that female student pursuing child marriage instead of their family; it could drive the child marriage number even higher than expected. United Nations Population Fund's State of the World Population 2020 report estimate that COVID-19 will hinder the end of child marriage, and there will be an additional 13 million child marriages between 2020 and 2030, UNICEF said 10 million children will be brides for pandemic. Child marriage not only robbed childhood from the girls but also destroy their dream and potentiality of independence.

In Bangladesh 51% women got married before 18 years old and, the country belongs to the top ten highest levels of child marriage countries (UNFPA, 2020). Bangladesh government set out a target in Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to eradicate the practice of early child marriage by 2030, but the marital inclination of female students during pandemic would make it difficult. Economic insecurity, school closures, lack of social security drives female students to marry off their early lives. There are many detrimental effects of early marriage, e.g., domestic violence, abuse, and early pregnancy, which results in end-up of education and their bright future. Without education, no nation can develop, so necessary measures should be taken to mitigate the drivers of female students' early marriage in Bangladesh.

1. COVID-19: A worldwide pandemic

At the beginning of December 2019, corona virus disease is known as COVID-19 (SARS-Cov-2) outbreaks in Wuhan, China. The 'WHO'[2] declared the COVID-19 outbreak a Global Health Emergency and Pandemic respectively 30th January 2020 and 11th March of 2020 (Hossain, 2020: 133). People can be affected by this virus via respiratory droplets of infected person coughs, sneezes or even talks or can be spread to people with close connections, and by peoples' touch or something infected by the virus and then touching the mouth, nose and eyes before they wash-up their hands. The initial symptoms of the corona virus are fever, cough and redness, shortness of breath, sore throat, and unexplained loss of taste or smell and in worst cases severe diarrhea. Most people recover from this disease without any hospital treatment, but 1 out of 5 affected people can suffer from severe breathing problems and need ventilation, especially aged people (50+). Doctors recommend that those patients must be admitted to a nearby hospital as soon as possible. WHO recommend social or 'Physical Distancing'[3] for not being affected by COVID-19 patients and 'Self-quarantine'[4] or self–isolation for COVID-19 affected patients to prevent the spread of the disease.

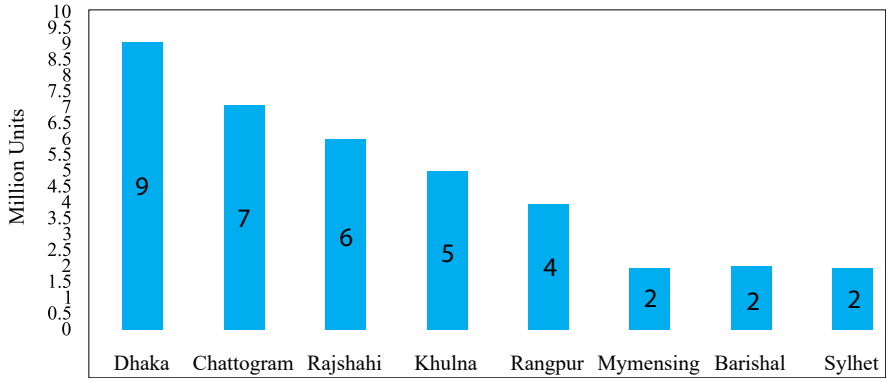
1. Child marriage clarifies the marriage that executes before the age of 18, is a significant problem faced by millions of girls each year Greene and et al., 2018), especially in Bangladesh.
2. The WHO which refers to the World Health Organization, was established for the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health on 7th April 1948. It is a specialized agency of the UN.
3. Social/Physical Distancing means someone has to keep physical segregation from others. The WHO has been recommends keeping at least a 1-meter distance from one-another to minimize the possibility of COVID-19 infection.
4. Self-quarantine means refrain from others contact for two weeks who are not ill or affected in the time of quarantine. Now (at the time of writing) the period of quarantine has been reduced to 10 days.

2. The scenario of child marriage during COVID -19 in Bangladesh

The present Bangladesh government has been declared to eliminate child marriage by 2030 but the absolute figure of child marriage is really very alarming and concerning. The UNICEF stated that Bangladesh is a homeland of 38 million child brides, among them a total of 13 million married before they reach at the age of 15. The diagram (Cf below) illustrate the rate of married girls from different divisions in Bangladesh. Among all the divisions Dhaka is the home to highest child brides and they are 9 million and in each divisions i.e., Mymensing, Barishal and Sylhet has 2 million child brides; all of them marry before their 18th Birthday unfortunately.

Figure-1

Married girls below age 18 in Bangladesh during COVID-19



Note: Adopted from Bangladesh Child Marriage Report, UNICEF 2020. The data has been presented in the chart by the authors.

Due to C-19, female students marriage rate had increased significantly but this marriage failed to develop living standard of child brides rather worsen it. Female students could not continue their education due to their early marriage which illustrates in the following table-1:

Table-1

Educational background of married girls during COVID-19 in Bangladesh

Nature	Married within the age of 15	Married between 15-18	Married: 2019 - 2020
Nascence Rate (first view)	83%	18%	Do
Women Education: Above Secondary Level Secondary Level Below Secondary Level/Not Attending School	3 20 26	23 65 67	Do
Wealth Quintile: Poorest Richest	21 12	63 38	Do
Residence: Rural Urban	16 14	54 44	Do

Note: Adopted from Bangladesh Child Marriage Report, UNICEF, 2020. The data has been presented in the table by the authors.

Explanation: It is explicit that only a total of 83% girls got married at the age of 15 during pandemic period of 2019-2020 while 18% girls got their marital partners between the age limit of

15-18 in the same period. In terms of women education in 2019-2020, the table shows that only 3% can reach 'above secondary levels' and this rate increased up to 23% within the age range of 15–18. Only 20% girls reach 'Secondary levels' and this rate increased at 65% in the same range of age. In terms of 'Below Secondary Level or Not Attending School' only 26% female students attain at the age of 15 while this number increased up to 67% during 2019-2020.

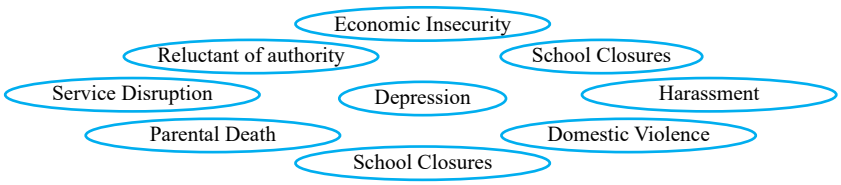
In view of financial condition, at the age of 15, a total of 21% girls got married whereas this number increased to 63% within the age of 15-18. On the other hand, 12% girls of the rich families got married at the age of 15 and that is extended to 38% up to the age range of 15-18 during the danger period of COVID-19 (2019-2020). Finally, 16% married girls reside in the rural area (aged 15) while 54% girls at the age limit of 15-18 in the same area. A total of 14% child brides (age below 15) live in urban area and the number expanded on to 44% at the age of 15-18 in.

3. Reasons of female students marriage during the COVID-19 pandemic

There are several reasons behind the propensity of the female students' marriage during the COVID-19, which are shown at a glance in the following figure.

Figure-2

Reasons behind the propensity of the female students' marriage



Note: This figure has been drawn based on various data collected from different sources.

■ **Economic insecurity:** In Bangladesh, early child marriage increases exponentially, and the harsh reason is economic insecurity. Center for Research and Information (an NGO), stated in recent research that a total of 38 million newly poor people emerged (1 in 5 persons) during the pandemic in Bangladesh.

A daily news portal, published from Dhaka (The Daily Vorer Pata, 2021) specified that the poverty rate increases almost 60%, employees are facing 25% salary cut, 14% of total population has been facing scarcity of food, whole economic system are at stake. Economic insecurity leads parents to marry off their girls because they cannot provide food and daily necessities. Nonetheless, most downwind effects of the COVID-19 pandemic faced by girl students who lost their primary income sources like home-based tuitions and a part-time job, with this income they usually meet the end. Now they are hardship which forced them for early marriage. The UNICEF report stated that more impoverished families are twice prone to marry off their daughter than affluent families at an early age. In pandemic, there are several reasons of economic insecurity in Bangladesh which are shown below:

Figure-3:

Reasons of economic insecurity during the pandemic at a glance



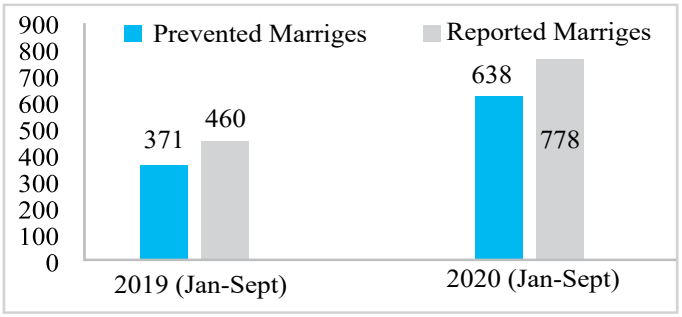
Note: The figure has been drawn by the authors from different available sources.

■ **Long time school closures:** School closers for Covid-19 significantly impacted on educational sectors and the social system as well. It severely challenges to combat child marriage in Bangladesh. It should be noted that all the students are detached from education and forgot their previous lessons; besides, these long-term school closures result in extra financial burden for those families who had been getting food and financial support from the school for their children education. Although some of the schools provided online classes but most of the female students were unable to afford these virtual devices, thus students were upgraded to new classes by auto pass.

Such system broaden session gap unexpectedly. School closures dissuade primary mechanisms for early child marriage, e.g., girl empowerment, social support and prospect of future career for girls. Not only that, parents are unable to manage their children for school closure; they do not consider any bright future for their girls, which inspire them for early marriage, indeed. However, the BRAC (2020) surveyed that 371 child marriage cases were prevented while 460 marriages were reported during January to September 2019. Again the ration were increased up to 638 (Prevented cases) and 778 were reported (got married) by January to September 2020 which is very alarming (Cf figure below).

Figure-4:

Prevented and reported of early child marriage during COVID-19



Note: Adopted from BRAC, 2020. The authors presented the data in the graph.

■ **Harassment and intimidation:** Many parents and their girls agreed for marry because of social security, harassment (physical and mental), and threats, including abduction, abuse or assault. Peoples mentality and prejudice make the marginal families' more vulnerable, so they cannot keep their girl unmarried if they wished to. Social norms indicate that they must give marry

their girl because their daughters are growing old or crossing limits for marriage. The marginal or low-income family cannot overcome this social restriction, and they cannot protect their daughter from society or criminals even they will not get help from police or local government authority. In Bangladesh, there are 3 million cases back logged in the Court related to women rights and safety (Cf Daily Star, 4th January 2021) and the procedures prolonged for COVID-19 related vacations or lockdown, lack of justice for rape and sexual harassment increases the fear among girls and their family which consequences female students' early marriage in Bangladesh.

■ **Depression:** The pandemic has a great impact on human mind which creates depression, and the marital inclination of female student's is its outcome. Female students are bored and home-bound, have typically lacked access to media, the internet and smart phones through which they could learn, and cannot move outside unnecessarily because their parents have forbidden them. The school closing effect is crushing; girls do not see any possibilities, jobs and opportunities and an overall bright future, creating depression. Girls do not find any viable way to overcome this depression without early marriage.

■ **Domestic violence:** Covid-19 pandemic increases domestic violence and various implications. Financial stress brings domestic stress, and the potential for violence grows; for lockdowns, many men are out of work and need more money to stay at home, for which pressure for dowry increased. Lockdowns escalate females work like cleaning, cooking, and maintaining home life; girls have to perform all this work with their mother, which is difficult for a daughter and brides who are still school-going students. Early marriage does not only put girls at higher risk of domestic violence and but it is also harmful to their mental health. Adolescent mothers have the risk of delivering pre-term and low weight infants, and the risk rate is 35 to 55% higher than older mothers; early pregnancy is the number one cause of death in girls aged 15-19 in Bangladesh. A recent study, from Bangladeshi NGO, "*Manuser Jonno Foundation*" illustrates that in June 2020, a total of 2,900 children were the victim of domestic violence in 53 out of 64 districts. The burden of women for dowry and workload increases domestic violence and encourage female students to early marriage as a solution to get rid of these problems.

■ **Service disruption:** The recent pandemic has upset the job market; small and medium industries and service companies, shops, private schools, and colleges shut down. Almost 13% of people lost their job in private sectors, most of the jobless were only income-generated persons who left their working place and went to the village and married a child bride. Despite this, another reason is that many foreign workers/migrants returned home for COVID-19, which provoked grooms and influenced girls and their guardians for early child marriage.

■ **Parental death:** The Corona pandemic has made the situation grave and heartbreaking all over the world. We have been fighting a ruthless war that has become indescribable; many families lost their beloved members so that many children lost their parents, some lost fathers or mothers. Because of losing guardians of the family, some has to decide to marry off their daughters early.

■ **Reluctant of authority:** In Bangladesh, different central and local government authority such as police, news agency, Court, and NGOs work to deter early child marriage, but for pandemic related lockdown concerns and officials were unable and reluctant to prevent child marriage, thus the families arranged child marriage smoothly. In addition, the concerned officials hide child marriage news because of the pandemic; only 20% of child marriages were reported while rest was hidden.

4. Positive effect of female students' early marriage during COVID-19

During COVID-19, positive effect of female students in early marriage was very limited in terms of its various implications. Low and middle income people were very much reluctant by setting their teenagers girls into marital performances/status due to various causes, noted above. However, the prime causes of positive effects of early marriage are delineated in the following manners:

■ **Social benefits:** Though the early marriage of female students has devastating impacts on society, there are some benefits of female students' marriage. First of all, those girls who lost parents found new guardians, family and shelter. Secondly, victims of social stigma and harassed girls and their families get physical security for marriage because the husband counts as a strong guardian in patriarchal societies like Bangladesh. 3. Thirdly, Social crime rate like eve-teasing, rape or abductions reduces.

■ **Economic benefits:** Most of the rural Bangladesh families are poor, they cannot fulfill their daughters' basic needs such as food, clothes, health care, and education, and the pandemic makes it worse than ever. Families are relieving from some financial burden to marry off their daughters. People can manage marriage at a comparatively low cost for pandemic situations, and the demand for dowry reduces, pushing low-income families to marry their daughters. Marry at a low cost or a little dowry sure of blessings for indigent parents.

5. Consequences of child marriage: present and future

The consequences of the marital inclination of female students during pandemic will be overwhelming for Bangladesh and will affect in various aspects of socio-economic and political life in the long run. Overall consequences of the marital trend of female students can be discussed in two parts, which are discussed below:

5.1. Prevailing Consequences:

Present effects of marital propensity of female students are not irreversible, but they can be visible within a short span of time. It will influence and create future effects of marital tendencies of the female students.

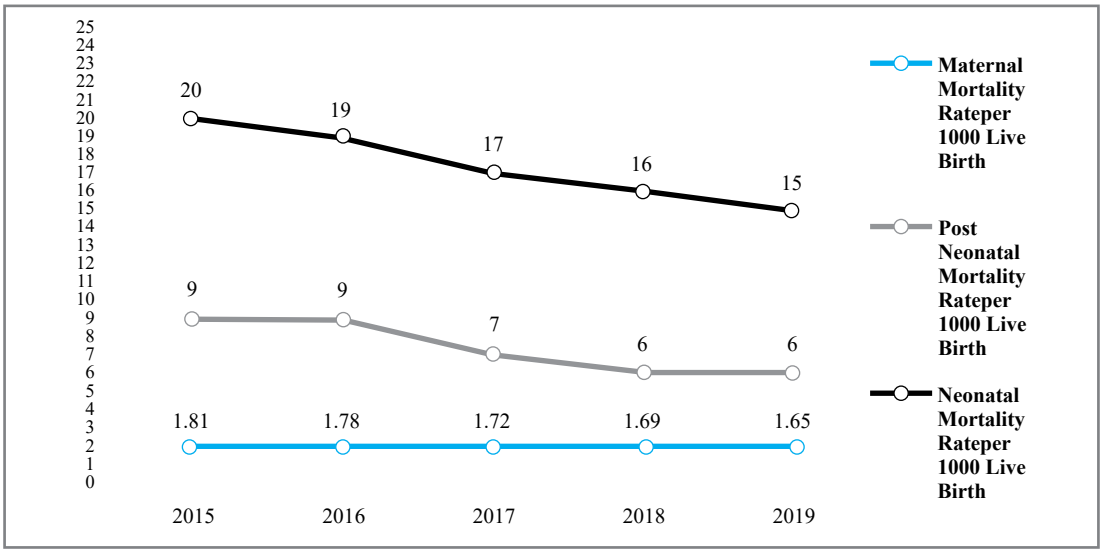
■ **Expanding population:** Although the Bangladesh government is committed to control the population growth but during the COVID -19 periods, female students' early marriage increase the rates population growth, resulting in early pregnancy and more birth. According to UNICEF report (Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh, New York, 2020), almost 5 in 10 Bangladeshi child brides bring forth before age 18, and 8 in 10 gave birth before their 20th birthday, 13% of child brides gave birth before 18 years old, whereas 83% gave birth at or after 18 years, the rate is sharply 70% higher, child brides give a birth average 3 to 4 children whereas women who married after 18 give birth 1 to 2 children on average. Hence, it would be difficult to control population for the pandemic because of female students' marriage.

■ **Rate of drop out increase:** UNICEF found that the married girls are over four times more likely to be drop out than unmarried girls and not return to school. Pandemic related school closures, travel restrictions and physical distancing increase the rate of drop out though the actual figure is unavailable due to lack of survey data.

■ **Rise of mortality rate and malnutrition:** Baby brides suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and severe depression. In addition, miscarriages, labor difficulties, postpartum hemorrhaging and obstetric fistulas are also key causes for high rate mortality. It is estimated that 70,000 girls within the ages of 15-19 die each year from pregnancy and childbirth-related complications. A teenage-mother is at a significantly higher risk of infant mortality, with stillbirths and neonatal mortality rates 50% higher in adolescents than in older women. The lack of health consciousness, limited medical care, domestic violence and risk of early pregnancy are the main causal factors of premature death of both mother and baby in Bangladesh (Cf, the following chart).

Figure-5:

Trend of maternal, neonatal and post neonatal mortality rate



Note: Adopted from statistical Year Book of Bangladesh, 2020: 494-98.

The above chart demonstrates the maternal, post neonatal and neonatal mortality rate of Bangladesh; here the units measure in per 1000 live birth. The data have shown that the maternal mortality rate was 1.81% in 2015 and 1.65% in 2019, which indicates a slow decrease rate over the time. The neonatal mortality rate is significantly higher; in 2015, 20% died, whereas, in 2019, it reached 15%. In 2015, the post neonatal mortality rate was 9%, and it reduces to 6% within five years, though the rate is higher than expected.

■ **Termination of education:** Female married students always left education permanently because they have to perform household chores, look after children and family members, and pressure to have a baby or become pregnant, or they do not have information about family planning or no access to contraception. Even if they got divorce in early life, they could not continue study because of socio-economic and religious dogmatism. Child marriage always forces girls to abandon school and robbed their dream of being independent financially.

5.2. Future effect of marital propensity of female students during pandemic

Future consequences of marital propensity of female students during pandemic are enormous. The long-term effects of this matter is inevitable and that must cause destabilization the family

structure. Most of the middle and lower middle class family will be broken up because of the new family members. However, the key consequences are as follows:

■ **Domestic violence:** It has been observed during the pandemic that the domestic violence has been increased rapidly due to child marriage. Both the bride and grooms were immature due to tender age (most cases below 20). As a result they were unable to perform their family duties staying in family.

■ **Economic growth and equity:** Bangladesh and the whole world have been faced in an economic slowdown, economic growth reducing significantly, and the absence of equity. When female students are banned from accessing education, their economic opportunities and prospects are limited and trapped into a cycle of poverty, which will continue until the next generation. Illiterate or little educated women are not empowered in their families or society, so there is no social equity between men and women.

■ **Increase divorce:** Recent study found that women with a low level of education and married between ages 15-19 years are 50% more likely to experience spousal abuse and physical and sexual violence in their laws house throughout their life. The C-19 pandemic creates economic insecurity and depression which is one of the reasons behind high rate of divorce and domestic violence in Bangladesh.

6. Importance of female education

Napoleon Bonaparte stated that "give me an educated mother, I shall promise you the birth of a civilized, educated nation"- if you educated a man, you educated an individual, but if you educated a woman, you educate a nation. To prevent child marriage, gender inequality, violence against women, empowerment of women, education is mandatory. If we help our female students to continue their education, they will become our assets and contribute to the further development of society. In Bangladesh, female education is essential for sustainable development in all respects. It could be noted that half of the population are women in Bangladesh; sustainable development is quite absurd without their vivid participation. Generally, if the girls continue to study or go to school, it helps them delay marriage. Education can help them to build their strong future and make them self reliant and empowered. During this C-19 pandemic, many of our female students got married, some of them will become child mothers, some will become single mothers, and they will face difficulties of early marriage which can be prevented by proper female education.

7. Findings and future implications

Female students' trend of early marriage robbed their educational as well family life and future career. Most of them often isolated from family and friends. The trend of female students towards marriage has a devastating impact on society. This will slow down long term economic growth and keep the generation stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty. The economic hardship, authorities' reluctant, service disruption, shutdown of educational institutions, mental and physical harassment, anxiety and severe depression because of the staying in home for long time, domestic violence along with many others causal factors influenced the middle and lower class people to allow their female students to instigate marry during the pandemic of Covid-19 in Bangladesh. As a result, population and drop out of female students' increases, mortality and malnutrition rises, deteriorated of quality education, abuse of women, slow down of national economic growth and

finally increase separation and divorces during the pandemic period in Bangladesh. To overcome these problems, students and their families and responsible authorities must work together to see a better future for Bangladesh.

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