ISSN 1608-7844
© Urban and Rural Planning Discipline
Khulna University

Plan Plus Volume-8 2018 (77-87)

EARLY MARRIAGE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY IN URBAN SLUMS OF KHULNA CITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a sincere effort to find out the effect of early marriage on women empowerment in the slums of Khulna City of Bangladesh. It was also an attempt to estimate the impact of other socio-economic and demographic variables related to early marriage (for example: employment status, educational attainment, age at marriage, household income, family size etc.) on women empowerment. A total of 120 respondents were selected by using quota sampling from two slum areas named Rupsha Char slum and 5 No. Ghat slum of Khulna City. Two groups were considered to be compared for measuring the effect of early marriage on women empowerment. One group represents those women who have become victims of early marriage (women married before age of 18 years) and another one represents those women who have been married at appropriate age (women married after age of 18 years). A Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI) was constructed to determine the level of women empowerment. Then a multiple linear regression model was used to estimate the impact of early marriage on women empowerment. The study found that the women, who are married at an early age are significantly less empowered than those of the other women, who married at appropriate age. The statistical evidence shows that age at marriage and household income has significant positive impact on women empowerment. Moreover, the findings also show that on an average, empowerment level increases when women become employed. Therefore, based on the statistical and empirical evidence it can be concluded that age at marriage has very significant positive influence on women empowerment and early marriage can be proved to be one of the major obstacles in the way of women empowerment in urban slums of Khulna city.

KEYWORDS: Early marriage, Women empowerment, Cumulative empowerment index

1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, the whole developing world is running for sustainable development through a holistic approach. Setting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was the very outset of this approach, which has inspired more than 150 nations to be committed to achieve seventeen essential development goals within 2030. Among the seventeen goals the crucial one is - 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', especially, for a country like Bangladesh, where a patriarchal society has been being nurtured since its dawn. Although many scenarios have changed regarding this goal in Bangladesh and the MDG Report 2012 depicts many progresses for this target, still there are many impoverished areas which are even not acquainted with the term 'women empowerment'. There are many socio-economic obstacles for

women empowerment in Bangladesh like poverty, illiteracy, lack of social awareness, family restriction, religious restriction and so on. The contribution of women can be a catalyst to achieve sustainable development.

Early marriage[1] is one of the inexorable socio-economic barriers on the way towards women empowerment of a country as it blocks the path of education and human development for women. Women loses the scope for personal development as well as their rights to full reproductive health and wellbeing, education, and participation in civil life due to hasty and premature marriage (Saxena, 1999 as cited in Vue, 2000). Early marriage also significantly limits their schooling opportunities; girls are often taken out of school in order to dedicate their time and capabilities to domestic, marital and maternal obligations (Guilbert, 2013). Consequently, these girls have little decision-making power in the household and a greater chances of suffering domestic violence (Jensen and Thornton, 2003 as cited in Guilbert, 2013).

The prevalence of early marriage in Bangladesh is 66 percent and Bangladesh holds the fourth highest position among the twenty countries which have the highest rate of early marriage (Malhotra et al., 2011). Early Marriage is one of the burning issues of this country which creates obstacles in the path of women empowerment. According to UNICEF in many developing countries the transition from adolescence to adulthood is abruptly cut short by early marriage, a practice that has serious consequences for the health and development of female adolescents (UNICEF, 2003 as cited in Nuruddin, 2005). Besides IPPF shows that early marriage is a both risk and barrier to the good health, family and social well-being and future opportunities of millions and girls in the developing countries. (IPPF, 2006).

Poverty is one of the main influencial factors of early marriage and for this reason the percentage of early marriage is higher in the slum areas. Khulna, one of the major metropolitan cities of Bangladesh, is seemed to be more vulnerable than that of the other cities in terms of per capita family income, poverty, early marriage and women empowerment. The impact of climate change and disaster proneness make it more vulnerable. Most people of this area are economically insolvent and culturally backward, which create a greater scope for early marriage of the women. According to ILO poor parents seem their girls burdensome for them to rear and grow up and that is why arrange marriages for their daughters, irrespective of the groom's status or the girl's opinion (ILO, 2002 as cited in IPPF, 2006). So, for the slum dwellers of Khulna City, it is quite natural for a girl to become a victim of early marriage. Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) 2012-2013 has found that the percentage of women who were first married before age of 15 in Khulna division is 31.10 and the percentage of women who were first married before age of 18 in Khulna division is 71.10. In both cases Khulna holds the third highest position for early marriage among all the divisions of Bangladesh (GOB et al., 2013). So, based on this context, the main objective of this study is to find out the impact of early marriage on women empowerment in the slum areas of Khulna city in Bangladesh.

[1] Women who got married before the age of 18 years in Bangladesh

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowerment has been identified as one of the key constituent essentials of poverty reduction, and as a primary development assistance goal by the World Bank (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005). As women constitute nearly half of the population, they can become a great resource in the development sector if they are properly mobilized, activated and organized (Roy, 1977 as cited in Parvin et al., 2004). Women empowerment, nowadays, has become mandatory for the holistic development of a country because the overall development can only possible through the development of individuals. In the broadest sense, empowerment can be defined as *the expansion of freedom of choice and action* (Narayan-Parker, 2002). While this definition provides an actual foundation for understanding women's empowerment, recent research has mostly emphasized on the multi-dimensionality of the concept, a direct effect of the various social and familial roles women occupy at given points in time (Mathur et al., 2007).

The relationship of gender and development is a major issue in development research and policy nowadays. Some of the great importance in the topic curtails from practical findings suggests that empowering women may not just be a worthy goal in its own right, but may indeed promote overall economic development (NBER, 2014). In 1994, at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, development organizations agreed that women's empowerment is essential for important development outcomes. Women can be empowered through the reduction of gender discrimination in household decisions and have the prospect to generate income and influence the reduction of mortality and fertility rates in the society (Sen, 1999 as cited in Wiklander, 2010).

In a least developing country like Bangladesh, the scopes of women empowerment have to face more complexities due to different socio economic barriers. In many parts of the world, reproduction and care of the family are responsibilities of women, while men enjoy the decision-making power. In some areas women are forced when it comes to mobility, voice, education, employment, health care and even pure existence (Wiklander, 2010).

Because of the stereotypical mindset of people, women in Bangladesh are in many ways inferior to and dependent on men from early childhood. In this patriarchal society, when the girl steps into puberty her marriage is being arranged and the family has to pay the husband's family a dowry to marry off their daughter to him (Hultberg, 2008). Even if the constitution declares equal rights to women, women still suffer from discrimination and violence in the house, at the workplace and on the society level as well (MOWCA, 2008 as cited in Hultberg, 2008). Though young girls prefer to marriage at appropriate age (after the age of 18), but it's still rare. The study of BITA shows 75.22 percent participants thinks that marriage at appropriate age[2] can be beneficial (BITA, 2007) . It is to be believed that there are many benefits from marriage at appropriate age such as educational completion, healthy life and financial profits (IPPF, 2006). Moreover, early marriage is a clear violation of human rights and the three related key concerns are the denial of childhood and adolescence, the curtailment of personal freedom and the lack of opportunity to develop a full sense of selfhood as well as the denial of psychosocial and

[2] Marriage after the age of 18 years.

emotional well-being, reproductive health and educational opportunity (UNICEF, 2003). Early marriage restricts the educational and employment scopes for women, which are supposed to be leading factors for empowerment. Wiklander (2010) argued that early age of marriage disrupts victim's education and since the victims lack proper employment, they are restricted in participating in the country's development.

According to UNICEF most of the girls in least developed countries are married before the age of 18 because of poverty, traditional social attitude and family pressure. Innocenti Digest-7 (2001) by UNICEF has presented that 51 percent of the girls in Bangladesh are married by the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2003). In the last decade, child marriage has affected 58 million girls, many of whom were married against their will and in violation of international laws and conventions (Hervish and Feldman, 2011). Women's capabilities can be wasted due to a number of factors such as poverty, low status in the family and community, backwardness in education, conventional social norms, lack of security, fear of social exclusion and criticism, etc. (BCDW, 2004). Well acceptance of early marriage is one of the forms of discrimination that the girls have to face in Bangladesh. Sometimes the poor parents are also scared about the fact that their daughters can be sexually abused or become scandalized if they are not married off early. Another factor that bothers the parents and persuades the early marriage is that dowry demands may raise, as their daughters get older (IPPF, 2006).

There are several factors that negatively affect women empowerment like lack of education, lack of employment, early entry into marriage etc. Early marriage is one of the important factors among them. Bandiera et al. (2017) identify a negative association between early entry into marriage and women empowerment. In addition, Mason and Smith (2003) find that women's age at marriage, their educations and open greater employment opportunities are positively affect women empowerment. Besides, Parvin et al. (2004) claims that women who are involved in any income generating activities are more empowered in Bangladesh. In addition, Sultana and Hossen (2013) found that women employment has a positive effect on women empowerment in Khulna city.

3. DATA AND METHODS

The study is explanatory in nature and both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to address the study objective. A total of 120 married women was taken as sample from two slums (60 married women from each slum) of Khulna city of Bangladesh named *Rupsha Char* slum and *5 No. Ghat* slum. Total samples were further divided into two groups: the victim of early marriage (women married at early age group) and those who are not victim of early marriage (women married at appropriate age group). Women who got married at the age below 18 years have been considered as 'women married at early age group' and women married at the age of 18 years or above 18 years have been considered as 'women married at appropriate age group'.

Quota sampling technique was used to select the sample from these two different groups (60 respondents from each group). Data were collected through questionnaire survey and a focused group discussion (FGD) was conducted to have a qualitative rank of key seven indicators of women empowerment. A Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI) was used as the means for measuring the status of empowerment of these two groups of respondents. Furthermore, a multiple linear regression model was used to show the effect of early marriage as well as the other socio-economic and demographic variables on women empowerment.

3.1. Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI): Dependent variable

The study construct the Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI) followed by Parvin et al. (2004) and Sultana and Hossen (2013) to measure the level of women empowerment because of its methodological simplicity and nature of a continuous variable. The CEI was constructed by combining seven key indicators of women empowerment - contribution to household income, access to resources, ownership of assets, participation in household decision-making, perception on gender awareness, coping capacity to household shocks and access to the political or development activities following Parvin et al. (2004). Each indicator again has a number of sub-indicators. The quantitative part correspond to five categories e.g., 1 = very low and 5 = very high. Each indicator assigned a quantitative rank from 1 to 5 according to the total score for each empowerment indicator received from its sub-indicators based on the field survey. The rank order was made based on total scores attaining from ranking of the individual indicator from the respondents in focus group discussion. The whole process of constructing of CEI is based on the basic process of constructing cumulative food insecurity index of Maxwell (1996) and the cumulative empowerment index of Parvin et al. (2004).

Table 1: Cumulative Empowerment Index (CEI)

Indicators	Quantitative Rank	Qualitative Rank	CEI Range: 28-140
Contribution to household income	1 to 5	7	(1-5)×7 = 7-35
Ownership of assets	1 to 5	6	(1-5)×6 = 6-30
Access to resources	1 to 5	5	(1-5)×5 = 5-25
Participation in household decision making	1 to 5	4	(1-5)×4 = 4-20
Coping capacity to household shocks	1 to 5	3	(1-5)×3 = 3-15
Access to the political or development activities	1 to 5	2	(1-5)×2 = 2-10
Perception on gender awareness	1 to 5	1	(1-5)×1 = 1-5

Source: Sultana and Hossen (2013) and Parvin et al. (2004)

This CEI varied from 28 to 140 in which 28 denote the lowest level of empowerment and 140 denote the highest level of empowerment. The CEI range is further divided into five equal categories and labeled as very low empowerment (28-50), low empowerment (51-72), medium empowerment (73-94), high empowerment (95-117) and very high empowerment (118-140) for

better understanding about the level of empowerment possessed by the respondents (Sultana and Hossen, 2013).

3.2. Multiple linear regression model

Multiple linear regression model is used to find out the effects of early marriage as well as other socio-economic and demographic variables on CEI (proxy variable of women empowerment). In the regression model, CEI is the dependent variable and age, education, household income and employment status are included as explanatory variables following Sultana and Hossen (2013). Early marriage status, age at marriage and family size are also included in the model as literature (Mason and Smith, 2003; Bandiera et al., 2017) support that these variables have significant impact on women empowerment. The variable age squared is incorporated in the model with a view to find out whether age has a non-linear relationship with women empowerment. Following two equations (equation-i and equation-ii) are used to estimate the effects of early marriage on women empowerment in the study area. Same set of explanatory variables are used in both the equations except the variables early marriage status (EMS) and age at marriage (AAM). Early marriage status (EMS) was used in equation (i) as dummy variable to capture the effect of early marriage on CEI. For equation (ii), age at marriage (AAM) as a continuous variable was used to estimate the effect of age at marriage on women empowerment. The main justification behind putting these two variables (EMS and AAM) in two separate equations was that the literature revealed that these two variables are representative of the issue early marriage from different perspective.

$$CEI = \beta_0+\beta_1 Age + \beta_2 Age\ Squared+ \beta_3 Edu + \beta_4 Inc + \beta_5 Emp+ \beta_6 EMS+ \beta_7 FS+ u\text{----(i)}$$

$$CEI = \beta_0+\beta_1 Age + \beta_2 Age\ Squared+ \beta_3 Edu + \beta_4 Inc + \beta_5 Emp+ \beta_6 AAM+ \beta_7 FS+ u\text{----(ii)}$$

Where,

CEI = Cumulative Empowerment Index
Age = Age of the Respondents (year)
Age Squared= Square of Age (year)
Edu = Education of the Respondents (years of schooling)
Inc = Household Income (in thousands of BDT per month)
Emp = Employment Status of the Respondents (dummy variable; 1 = employed, 0 = otherwise)
EMS= Early Marriage Status (dummy variable; 1 = yes, 0 = otherwise)
AAM= Age at Marriage (year)
FS= Family Size (number of family member)
β_0 = Intercept term
β_i = Regression co-efficient
u = Stochastic disturbance term

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Demographic and socio-economic status of women

Literature on women empowerment issue (Mason and Smith, 2003; Parvin et al., 2004; Bandiera et al., 2017) confirm that demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents have significant influence on their empowerment. Table no. 2 depicts and compares the demographic and socio-economic status of women married at early age and women married at appropriate age. Additionally, through t-test it shows whether there is significant mean difference between these two groups of women with respect to the selected variables.

Table 2: Socio economic status of the respondents

Variable	Women married at early age (n=60)				Women married at appropriate age (n=60)				t-value
	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	
Age (Years)	31.87	13.40	15	70	31.48	8.21	18	60	0.189
Educational Qualification (Years)	3.63	2.82	0	10	3.98	3.51	0	16	-0.602
Age at Marriage	13.93	1.98	7	17	18.87	1.32	18	24	-16.045***
Family Size (Number)	4.79	1.73	2	11	4.53	1.48	2	11	0.852
Total Family Income (BDT per month)	4775	3079	2000	25000	5263	2992	1000	15000	-0.881
Income of Respondents (BDT per month)	703	1150	0	5000	1057	1091	0	4500	-1.727**
Total Family Expenditure (BDT per month)	4758	2653	2000	20000	5180	2819	1000	15000	-0.844

Source: Authors' Calculation Based on Field Survey, 2014

N.B.: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Results of table no. 2 shows that the mean age of women married at early age is 31.87 years with a high standard deviation of 13.40 years because girls' age start from 15 years of age belong to this group. Whereas mean age is 31.48 years for women married at appropriate age. The mean years of schooling for women married at early age and women married at appropriate age is almost similar; which is 3.63 and 3.98 years respectively. The mean age at marriage for women married at early age is significantly less than women married at appropriate age and it is a very

expected result. Through the table no. 2 it is quite clear that the family size is pretty same, as both groups live in a similar socioeconomic settings. Mean of the total family income per month for women married at early age is BDT 4,775 and for women married at appropriate age is BDT 5,263. Here mean expenditure of family per month for two groups is BDT 4,758 and BDT 5,180 respectively. Result of the t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between these two groups of women with respect to their mean age, education, household size, household income and household expenditure. However, mean personal income of women married at early age is significantly lower than those of women married at appropriate age. Therefore, we can claim that these two groups of women are homogenous and comparable with respect to the selected demographic and socioeconomic variables.

4.2. Extent of women empowerment

The descriptive statistics on CEI of both women married at early age and women married at appropriate age and their distribution are represented in table no. 3. The result shows that 5.00 percent women married at early age are very low empowered, 50.00 percent are low empowered and 45.00 percent have medium empowerment. None belongs to high or very high level of empowerment category. Mean CEI of this group of women is 70.27 with a standard deviation of 9.88.

Table 3: Distribution of women on the basis of CEI

Category	Women married at early age		Women married at appropriate age		t-value
	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	
Very low empowerment (28-50)	3	5.00	1	1.67	-2.75***
Low empowerment (51-72)	30	50.00	27	45.00	
Medium empowerment (73-94)	27	45.00	29	48.33	
High empowerment (95-117)	-	-	3	5.00	
Very high empowerment (118-140)	-	-	-	-	
Total	n = 60	100	n = 60	100	
	Mean=70.27; SD=9.88 Min.=44; Max.=93		Mean=75.78; SD=2.03 Min.=50; Max.=109		

Source: Authors' Calculation Based on Field Survey, 2014

N.B.: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

If we look at the result of women married at appropriate age group, it shows that only 1.67 percent have very low empowerment, 45.00 percent are low empowered, 48.33 percent are medium empowered. The result also shows that 5.00 percent women married at appropriate age have high level of empowerment but none of the women married at early age has this level of empowerment. Mean CEI of women married at appropriate age group is 75.78, minimum CEI is 50 and maximum CEI is 109. This result indicates that women who are married at appropriate age are in a better empowerment status than those of early married women. Furthermore, the result of t-test confirms that mean CEI of women married at early age significantly lower than those women married at appropriate age.

4.3. Result of multiple linear regression analysis

Two regression models have been estimated covering total sample respondents based on equation (i) and equation (ii) including all explanatory variables of CEI. Table no. 4 explains the result of estimated multiple regression models. In model-1, as a dummy variable early marriage status is used to capture the effect of early marriage on women empowerment. In model-2, as a continuous variable age at marriage has been included to estimate its effect women empowerment in slum area.

Table 4: Effects of Explanatory Variable on Women Empowerment

Explanatory Variable	Dependent Variable: CEI	
	Model-1	Model-2
	Coefficient	Coefficient
Age	0.260 (0.482)	0.182 (0.478)
Age Squared	-0.003 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.006)
Education	0.233 (0.364)	0.220 (0.361)
Household Income	0.868** (0.358)	0.758** (0.360)
Employment status	5.065** (2.157)	5.575** (2.122)
Early Marriage Status	-3.683* (2.076)	---
Age at Marriage	---	0.822** (0.350)
Family Size	-0.634 (0.656)	-0.444 (0.660)
Constant	65.609 (9.452)	51.052*** (9.529)
N	120	120
R^2	0.17	0.19

Source: Authors' Estimation Based on Field Survey, 2014

N.B.: Standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

In both model-1 and model-2, it is found that an increase in household income of BDT 1,000 per month increases CEI on an average by 0.868 unit and 0.758 unit respectively which are statistically significant at 5 percent level. This result indicates that household income has a positive effect on women empowerment which supports the findings of Sultana and Hossen (2014). Model-1 shows that if women married at early age then CEI decreases on an average by 3.683 units compared to women married at appropriate age and which is statistically significant at 10 percent level. The result is expected and the probable reason is that the women who married at early age have less scope to contribute to household income as most of them are not employed, lack of access to resources, lack of ownership of assets, less participation in household decision-making and lack of perception on gender awareness. And if a women become employed then CEI increases on an average by 5.065 units which is statistically significant at 5 percent level. This implies that employment has a positive impact on women

empowerment. Model-2 shows that a one year increases in age at marriage increases CEI on an average by 0.822 unit which is statistically significant at 5 percent level. These results supports the findings of different literatures (Mason and Smith, 2003; Bandiera et al., 2017) that early marriage has a negative, conversely age at marriage has a positive effect on women empowerment in low income countries. Here it is clear that greater economic opportunity of the women has great influence on the way of empowerment and that can be possible with higher educational attainment and marriage at appropriate age.

5. CONCLUSION

In this post-modern era, when development goals are capturing the major concentration, women empowerment is one of the predominant issues for making the path of development smoother and easier. Moreover, for a poverty-stricken developing country like Bangladesh, where patriarchal society has been reigning from the very beginning, women empowerment is a crucial issue to be researched for. There are many challenges that are faced by the women in Bangladesh in the path of empowerment and early marriage is one of the vital one. Early marriage can be proved as a major obstacle for women empowerment in this country as it restricts the education and economic opportunity of women. The research depicts through the measurement of CEI that women, who have been married at early age are comparatively less empowered than those of the women, who married at appropriate age. Moreover, by the use of multiple linear regression models, the study also concludes that change in employment status from unemployed to employed creates a positive impact on women empowerment. Besides, the study result confirms that early marriage negatively affect the women empowerment in the slum area of Khulna city. Accordingly, the findings reveal that age at marriage has a significant positive impact on women empowerment. So, based on the study findings it can be concluded that early marriage has a negative impact on women empowerment and age at marriage and having an employment status can have a greater positive impact on women empowerment.

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