

# ‘Motherhood in childhood’: Consequences of early marriage on pregnancy outcomes among undocumented Bangladeshi migrants in Kolkata, India

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## Early Marriage of girls

Child marriage or forced marriage is a phenomenon that affects both the developed and the developing world. In some countries prevalence is extremely high across the whole population. The reality is that accepted social norms and in many countries discriminatory laws provide a venue of legitimacy to the harmful practices such as child marriage, that shape a girl’s life and indeed the society in which she lives. These social norms are the fundamental drivers of discrimination and must be challenged everywhere. Child marriage is a sequence of discrimination that begins at a girl’s birth and is reinforced in her community, in her marriage and which continues throughout her entire life.

## Adolescent pregnancy: Absence of choice

Child brides often become mothers at an early age. Child marriage encourages sexual activity when girls are still developing and know little about their bodies, their sexual and reproductive health, and their right to contraception.. Soon after marriage, they face pressure from their husband and in-laws, their family and the wider community, to prove their fertility. In fact, pregnancy during adolescence is intrinsically linked to child marriage (Girls not brides, 2016).

Adolescent pregnancy is often not the result of a deliberate choice, but rather the absence of choices. Teenage pregnancy affects girls’ education and income potential as many are forced to drop out of school which ultimately threatens future opportunities and economic prospects. It has ill effects on reproductive health of the young mothers. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA, 2013), “Pregnancies among girls less than 18 years of age have irreparable consequences. It violates the rights of girls, with life-threatening consequences in terms of sexual and reproductive health, and poses high development costs for communities, particularly in perpetuating the cycle of poverty” Health consequences include not yet being physically ready for pregnancy and childbirth leading to complications and malnutrition as the majority of adolescents tend to come from lower-income households. The risk of maternal death for girls under age 15 in low- and middle-income countries is higher than for women in their twenties (UNFPA, 2013). Early marriage extends a woman’s potential childbearing capacity, which itself represents a risk to mothers and adverse pregnancy outcomes.

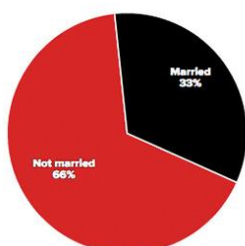
## Early Marriage/child marriage in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries with 150 million people, a considerable proportion of whom living below the national poverty line. The population in Bangladesh is predominantly rural, with almost 80 percent of the population living in rural areas. Bangladesh has the second-highest rate of child marriage in the world, second only to Niger, according to the United Nations children's agency, UNICEF. About 74 percent of Bangladeshi women currently aged 20 to 49 were married or in a union before age 18, despite a minimum legal marriage age for women of 18. Bangladesh is one of the worst countries in the world for child marriage. Roughly 66% of Bangladeshi girls are married off before they are 18 years old.

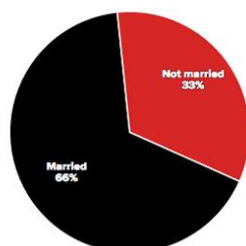
In Bangladesh there is "strong social pressures to get girls married, in part to prevent them from having a romantic or sexual relationship before marriage."

## Child marriage: Coping mechanism for Poverty in Bangladesh

Percentage of Girls Married Before the Age of 18 in the Developing World



Percentage of Girls Married Before the Age of 18 in Bangladesh



Causes of early marriage are various and complex. Child marriage is a way of dealing with the perceived problems that girls represent for families, the problems that arise from the low value given to women and girls. Child marriage in Bangladesh is often a coping mechanism for poor families. Parents who are unable to feed their children, or pay for their education costs, may seek a husband for their daughters simply so that the girls can live and get food. Cross border migration of grooms also fasten this process of marriage of Bangladeshi girls since the parents feel that their daughters should also migrate with

the grooms after migration to India to start family life. The main causes of early marriage for a Bangladeshi girl, harassments she faces at Border and causes and consequences of her early pregnancy has been discussed at the end of this extended abstract with the help of a framework.

**Hypothesis:** “It is assumed that cross border Bangladeshi female migrants who got married as a child or teenage are more likely to have adverse pregnancy outcomes.”

**Objective of the study:** This paper tries to investigate how early age of marriage affect the pregnancy outcome of the Undocumented Bangladeshi Migrants in Kolkata, India. It also focuses on the migrant’s vulnerabilities at the Indo-Bangladesh border environment.

**Data and Methods:** Due to physical immaturity, young girls are more susceptible to obstructed labor, which is a leading cause of maternal mortality globally (Nour, 2008). “Child marriage is an epidemic in Bangladesh, and only worsens with natural disasters,” said Heather Barr, senior researcher on women’s rights.

Data for this research (as a part of Ph.D. research) was collected in the year 2016 from 200 female (15-49 years) undocumented Bangladeshi migrants residing in Kolkata, India. 200 male migrants were also interviewed but that sample has not been included in this present study. The data was collected by using **Respondent Driven Sampling** which combines "snowball sampling" with a mathematical model that weights the sample to compensate for the fact that the sample was collected in a non-random way. It is a widely used method for sampling from hard-to-reach human populations including migrants. Descriptive and bivariate analysis has been done to accomplish the objective. Marriage below age 12 has been termed as ‘Very Early Marriage’, marriage at the age of 12-17 as ‘Early marriage’ and marriage at 18 or above has been termed as ‘Marriage at Legal Age’. Adverse outcome of pregnancy include Miscarriages, Abortions and Infant deaths occurring to the respondents.

## Results and Discussion

### ➤ Too young to wed; too early to become a wife

The impact of early marriage on girls and to a lesser extent on boys is wide-ranging. Within a rights perspective, three 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 emotional well-being, reproductive health and educational opportunity. The loss of adolescence, the forced sexual relations, and the denial of freedom and personal development attendant on early marriage have profound psychosocial and emotional consequences. Inadequate socialization, discontinuation of education, great physiological and emotional damage due to repeated pregnancies devastates these girls (UNICEF, 2009). Early marriage inevitably denies teens and children their right to the education which is essential for their personal development, their preparation for adulthood, and their effective contribution to the future wellbeing of their family and society.

The mean age at marriage of these migrants was 14.7 years. A considerable proportion of the migrant respondents got married below 12 years of age and for mostly it was against their will. Around three-fourths got married between 12-17 years. Shockingly, only 12 % of them married at the age of 18 or above indicating that as high as 88% of the migrant got married before the legal age. Most migrants are unhappy in an imposed early marriage and feel very isolated. As they migrate with only husband, they have nobody to talk to as they are surrounded by people who endorse their situation.

### ➤ Cross border Undocumented migration: A curse to young female migrant

*Fear of abandonment* is one of the main reasons behind these child brides to accompany their migrant husband and also become cross border undocumented following husband’s footprints. Their lives become more miserable after migration without their families, in-laws, friends along with fear of identity and low awareness and knowledge about contraception at destination. “I got married at 13 and after two days of marriage we came to Kolkata by giving money to brokers who helped to cross the border. I felt alone without my family. I did not know anything about sex and pregnancy. My mother just gave me a box of pills and asked me to have it regularly after marriage. Later I got to know they were contraceptive pills”- 15 years old migrant.

The *marriages that preceded abandonment* were often violent and deeply troubled. Faced with a reality of being unable to feed their children, being returned to parents who do not want them back, and/or facing extreme social stigma as a result of the broken marriage often force these female migrants to cross the border and come to India to earn a living for themselves as well as their children. They mostly keep their children back at their parent’s house in Bangladesh and in very few occasions the children accompany if they are old enough to find a job in India. “I was second time pregnant when my husband left me and came to India. I left my two children with my mother and

came to India not to search for my husband (who got married to an Indian girl) but to earn a living'- 21-year female married migrant.

**Rape and harassment while crossing the border:** The whole process of migration from Bangladesh to India without legal documents is imbued with fear and potential threats and violence from the start. A large proportion of migrants irrespective of sex, faced harassment perpetuated by the Border Security Forces (BSF) while crossing Indo-Bangladesh border. Surprisingly, almost half of the migrants experienced it from the agents (dalals) who promised help in crossing the border illegally in exchange of money. Female Bangladeshi migrants often face verbal abuse, physical harassment as well as sexual harassment and rape by Border security forces if they get caught while crossing the border from Bangladesh to India. *"My husband migrated immediately after marriage and I was coming to India with Broker/agent but we all got caught by the security force of India. I was raped thrice by the BSFs before they allowed me to cross the border."*- 17-year-old married migrant. As high as 90% Bangladeshi migrants felt that women get harassed in many ways while crossing the border.

**Association between any kinds of harassment at border with adverse outcome of pregnancy:** It was unfortunate to find out that 60% of female migrants who faced any kind of harassment at the border had adverse outcome of pregnancy as compared to 43% women who did not face any kind of harassment. This raises concern about the adverse implication of harassment at the border on the reproductive health of the female migrants who cross the borders of their home country for a living. But this should be also noted that these harassments would not have happened to the migrants if they cross the borders in a documented and legal way. This may be the reason why 70% of the female migrants think crossing border to be 'dangerous' as compared to only 16% of the male migrants

➤ **No contraceptive use by husband**

*"My husband does not like to use condoms and ask me to take pills. They think there is no need to use condom"*. This was reported by most of the female migrants who used contraception. The female migrants often complained about the undesirable health effects of pills and nausea feeling which mostly refrain them to take pills thus exposing themselves to multiple pregnancies and adverse pregnancy as well as health outcomes.

➤ **"Childhood cut short": Too early to become a mother**

In addition to a lack of information about family planning and access to contraception, young married also often face pressure from their husbands and in-laws to get pregnant immediately and may fear negative consequences, including abandonment and divorce, if they fail to produce children. Migrants who know about contraception, can hardly avail them due to fear of identification or due to shame at medical/grocery shops. Thus, they usually end up having children very soon and in a much unplanned way. The mean age of pregnancy of these migrants was 15.7 years. More than one-fifth migrants got pregnant within 6 months of their marriage and around 75% got pregnant within one year of their marriage. The childhood of these migrants was cut short. Most of them spent their *"Motherhood in childhood"* by nurturing her own child.

One of the migrant respondent aged 16 years said that *"I was in class 9 when I was forced to marry. I wanted to pass at least secondary level so that I can do tuitions at home or do a job somewhere. I had a big dream since no one from my locality or relatives studied so far. But within three months of marriage I started missing my period; it was when I got to know that I was pregnant. It was the end of my school and all of my dreams"*.

➤ **"In sickness or in health": Consequences of "Motherhood in Childhood"**

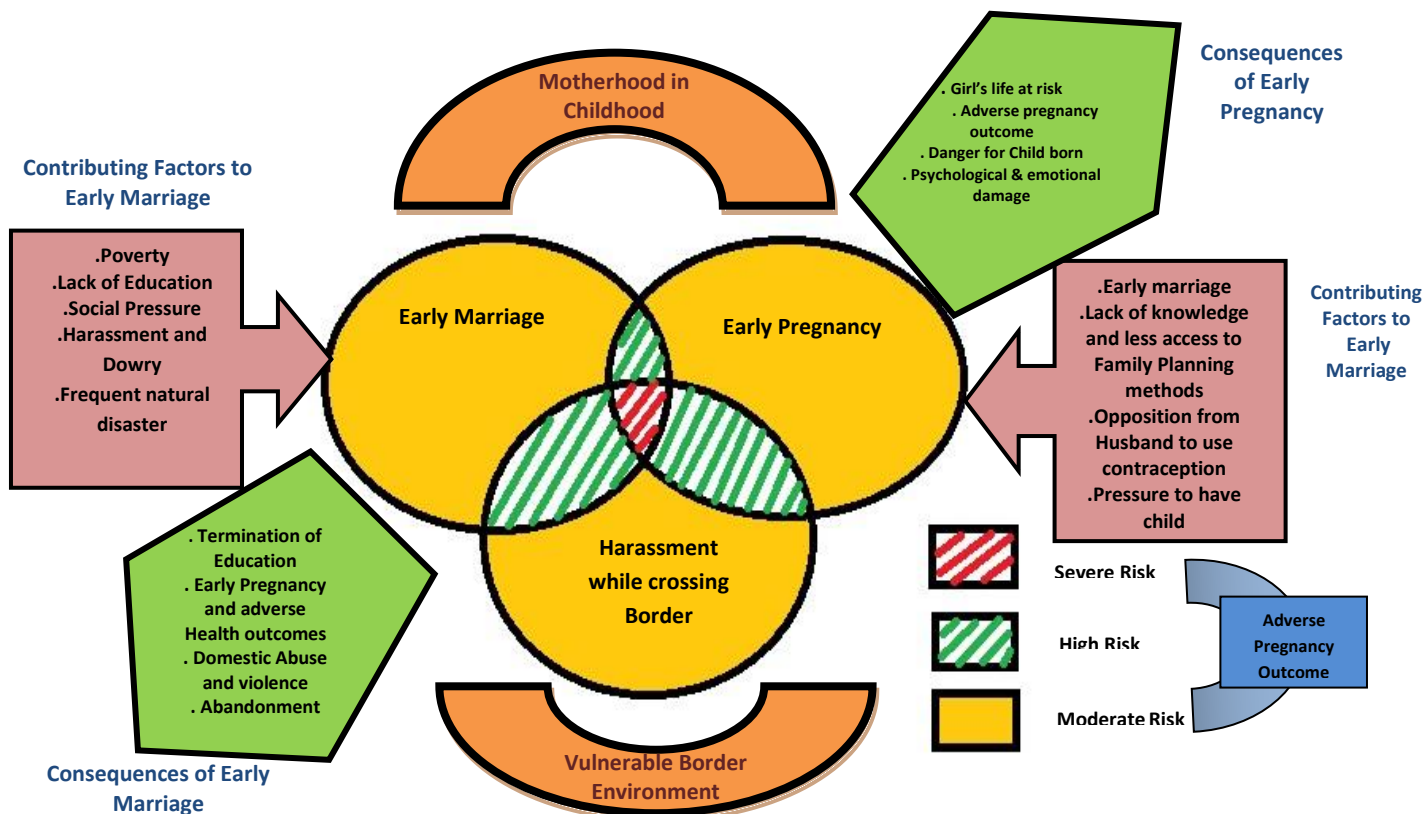
Early motherhood can affect the psychosocial development of the infant. The children of teen mothers are more likely to be born prematurely with a low birth weight, predisposing them to many other lifelong conditions (Gibbs et al., 2012). The children of child brides/young mothers are more likely to be stillborn or die within the first week of their life than the children of women who give birth later (Girls not Brides, 2016). The risks of early pregnancy and childbirth are well documented: increased risk of dying, increased risk of premature labour, complications during delivery, low birth-weight, and a higher chance that the newborn will not survive (The Allan Guttmacher Institute, 2005).

The mean number of children of these migrants was 2.7 but the mean number of pregnancies was 3.7. This is already showing that there have been cases of adverse outcome of pregnancies among these migrants. A little less than half migrants having very early marriage had at least one miscarriage in their life and another considerable proportion had two or more miscarriages. Number of miscarriages was relatively much lower among the migrants who got married at the legal age. More than 20% migrants who had very early marriage (below 12 years) had 2 or more infant deaths and more than half of them had at least one infant death. Infant death was also high among the

migrants who got married between 13-17 years had at least one infant death. Again, infant deaths were much lower among the migrants marrying after attaining the legal age. Number of children was also very high among migrants marrying at a very early age as compared to those marrying at legal age. Very few migrants and their spouses were educated enough to understand the adverse effect of early and multiple pregnancies. As high as 70% of the female migrants who got married below 12 years of age had adverse outcome of pregnancy in their lifetime as compared to 36% females who got married at the legal age.

### Protecting Bangladeshi Child Brides and young migrants

While the problem of child marriage and early pregnancy is particularly egregious in Bangladesh, it is important to remember this problem plagues millions of girls across the world irrespective of migrant and non migrant status. Child marriage cannot be tackled in isolation. It is inextricably linked to abuses that affect many girls and women throughout their lives. No or low education, very early age of marriage, higher number of children, experiences of miscarriages as well as infant deaths and above all their undocumented nature of migration have directly or indirectly affected the reproductive health of these migrants. Awareness about ill effects of early marriage and early pregnancy on the health of females should be spread in both India and Bangladesh. Expanding measures to prevent child marriage and providing assistance to married children and adults who married as children is detrimental. The efforts and promises of Bangladesh’s government to end child marriage have not translated into adequate action yet. Set up or build capacity of watchdog groups at borders, particularly for the India-Bangladesh border, to document violence, including sexual violence or coercion, ensuring that such cases get immediate attention. Sensitizing border personnel and strengthening their supervision is needed so that they are aware of the rights of Bangladeshi undocumented migrants, and the principles of safe repatriation, to reduce the exploitation of migrants. These undocumented migrants and teen age mothers should have an enabling environment to enjoy the various rights in their life of Young Motherhood and being a cross border migrant; Right to Equality and Non-Discrimination, Right to marriage, choose a spouse and Minimum age of Marriage, Right to Education, Right to be free from Physical, Mental and Sexual Violence, Right to Health, Right to exercise sexual and reproductive rights, Right of child brides/children to express their views freely, Preparedness to natural calamity etc. Exercising these rights will enable the female migrants to lead a life free of early marriage, unwanted pregnancy and exploitation at border. Thus no bride will say “Marriage shattered my dreams”.



**Risks of Early Marriage, Early Pregnancy and harassments at Border among the female Undocumented Bangladeshi Migrants in Kolkata**