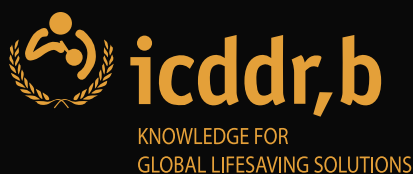




CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

Findings from a National Survey
2013



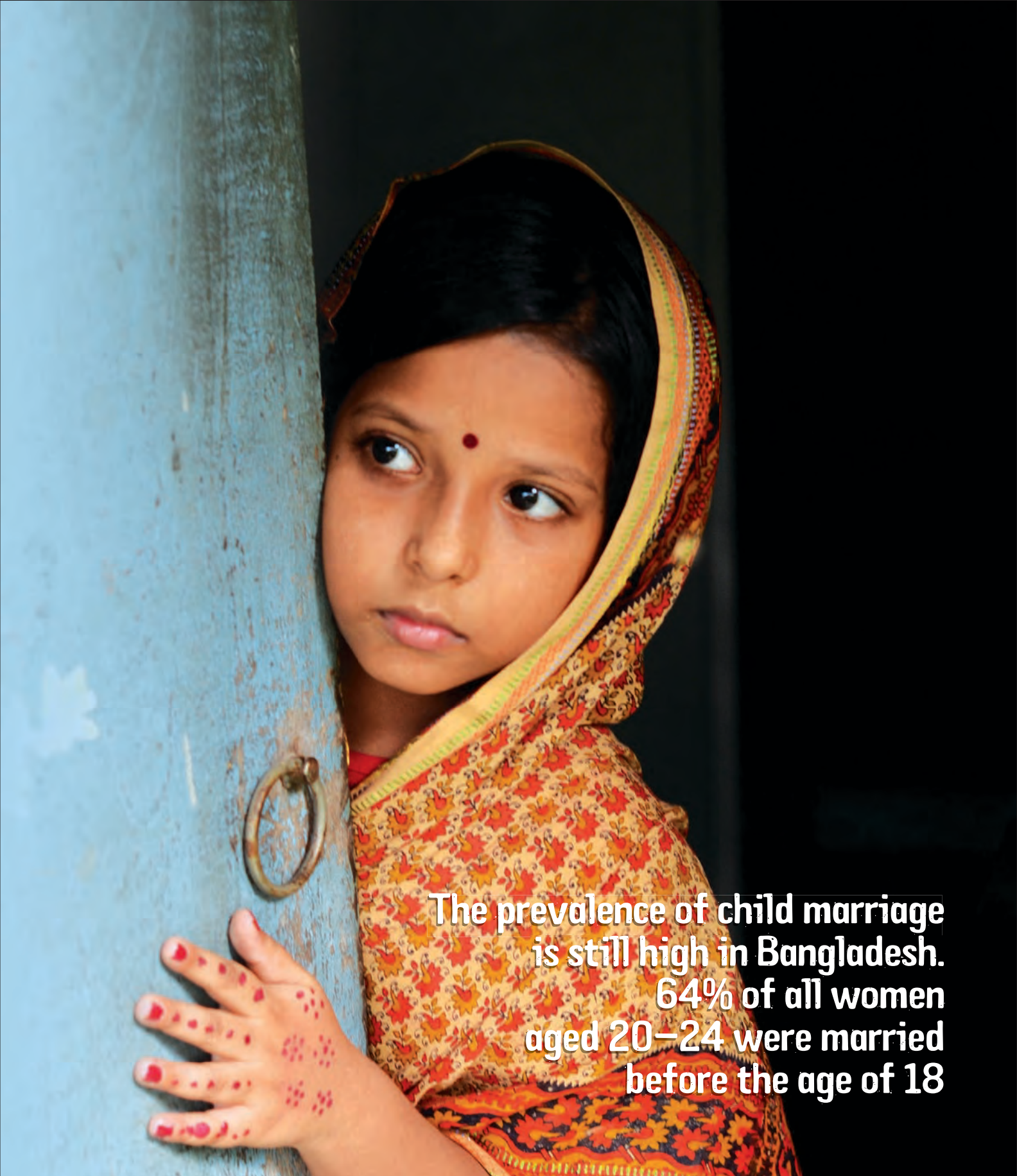


2% In Bangladesh
of women
are married before
the age of 11



DISCLAIMER

Plan is committed to ensuring the security, privacy and dignity of all the children that we work with. All copyrights© reserved. No part of this publication/photo may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means without prior permission of Plan Bangladesh. Please email plan.bangladesh@plan-international.org for more information.



**The prevalence of child marriage
is still high in Bangladesh.
64% of all women
aged 20–24 were married
before the age of 18**



icddr,b

KNOWLEDGE FOR
GLOBAL LIFESAVING SOLUTIONS



Plan



This research was commissioned by **Plan International Bangladesh**
The research was conducted by **The International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b)**
and **Associates for Community and Population Research (ACPR)**
The Principal Investigator of this research was **Dr. Rukhsana Gazi**

Edited by **Sarah Lewis (Consultant)**

Research Team

icddr,b

Dr. Rukhsana Gazi, Scientist, Evidence to Policy

Dr. Quamrun Nahar, Associate Scientist, Centre for Population, Urbanization and Climate Change

Md. Humayun KABIR, Assistant Scientist, Evidence to Policy

Md. Hamidul Huque, Statistician, CSU for CCAH

M. Moinuddin, Research fellow, Child Health Service

Dr. Shams El Arifeen, Director & Senior Scientist, CCAH

ACPR

APM Shafiur Rahman, Tauhida Nasrin, M. Sekander Hayat Khan

Plan International Bangladesh

Dr. Selina Amin, Director-Country Projects

Zinnat Afroze, Child Protection Advisor

Amina Mahbub, Former Manager – Monitoring Evaluation and Research

With thanks to **Professor Nitai Chakrabarty**

For assisting with the national survey sampling frame

Advisory Support

Elena Ahmed, Interim Country Director

Design Concept

Tony Michael Gomes, Director, Communications & Public Relations

Design & Production: **Expressions Ltd.**

C O N T E N T S

	iv	List of figures
	iv	List of tables
	v	List of acronyms
	vi - vii	Foreword
	01 - 04	Executive summary
05 - 09		Chapter 1 Introduction
	06	1.1 Child marriage in Bangladesh
	07	1.2 The consequences of child marriage
	08	1.3 Efforts to end child marriage: Plan International Bangladesh's Programme
	09	1.4 Objectives
10 - 12		Chapter 2 Methodology
13 - 31		Chapter 3 Child marriage in Bangladesh: Key Findings
	13	3.1 Age at first marriage
	14	3.2 The prevalence of child marriage
	14	3.3 Trends in child marriage
	15	3.4 Lack of Education: a driver of child marriage
	16	3.5 Child marriage and household wealth
	16	3.6 The groom: background characteristics
	17	3.7 The reasons for child marriage
	18	3.8 Empowerment in decision-making and consent taking
	20	3.9 The consequences of child marriage
	21	3.10 Awareness and perceptions: the causes and consequences of child marriage
	27	3.11 Awareness and perceptions: the prevention of child marriage
32		Chapter 4 Summary of key findings
33 - 34		Chapter 5 Recommendations for action
35		Chapter 6 References
Annex		National survey sampling frame Survey Tool

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1:

Percentage of all women aged 20-24 who were married before the age of 18, by residence

Figure 2:

Percentage of currently married women, married by specific ages (<15 years, <18 years)

Figure 3:

Percentage of currently married women aged 20-24 who were married before the age of 18, by educational attainment

Figure 4:

Percentage of currently married women aged 20-24 by wealth quintiles

Figure 5:

An example of successful child marriage prevention

LIST OF TABLES

- Table **01** : Distribution of the background characteristics of women surveyed
- Table **02** : Age at first marriage of women by residence (rural and urban areas)
- Table **03** : Grooms' educational attainment and employment status
- Table **04** : Reported reasons for child marriage
- Table **05** : Types of marriage and decision-making
- Table **06** : Status and place of marriage registration, and status of consent taking
- Table **07** : Education and employment status at the time of marriage and after marriage
- Table **08** : Knowledge of the legal age for marriage
- Table **09** : Perceived reasons for child marriage
- Table **10** : Perceived consequences of child marriage
- Table **11** : Perceptions of the changing trends in child marriage
- Table **12** : Knowledge and perceptions of child marriage prevention
- Table **13** : Knowledge and perceptions of child marriage prevention organisations and birth registration programme

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACPR	Associates for Community and Population Research
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
icddr,b	International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UP	Union Parishad
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organisation



“Child marriage is one of the worst violations of a child’s rights that we can imagine.

It especially affects girls, robbing them of their childhood.”

- Mingming Remata-Evora
Country Director, Plan International Bangladesh



MESSAGE

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to write a message for this publication. I really don't understand much about child marriage baseline, but I know a thing or two about child marriage.

Because, I have seen quite a few in my neighbourhood, village and among relatives. I have seen my classmates suddenly and quietly stop coming to school because they were married off. I have seen how they suffer after they suddenly get uprooted from their family setting. I don't like to see them pining and living a miserable life.

And being out of the school is not a happy feeling. I stopped going to school when I just passed grade 6 and started working in a scrap metal shop close to my school because my father got ill and earning bread was more important than going to school. When I saw my friends going to and from school walking past the shop I shrunk and cringed and could not look into their eyes. I felt I was pushed out and no more qualified to be with them and call them my friends. I don't like it and I don't want any children to go through similar experience.

I don't know but this is perhaps what got me moving. Kanchan Da, a member of a Child Organisation (CO), felt sympathized when I told him that I wanted to return to school. He talked to my parents and had them convinced after a round of meetings. It was on his prodding that I joined the CO and started to work – we would spread messages through drama, rallies and door-to-door visit and approach parents planning a child marriage.

I feel so good when we can stop a child marriage and bring a boy/girl back to school. It is not easy. Parents of a girl awaiting marriage would start with swearing at us and literally chase us out when we approached them. Some would laugh at us and others would complain to my parents. But things are improving and people have started to appreciate our work and few people dare to hold child marriage openly these days.

I feel good when people praise my work, our work. The last few weeks I have been feeling kind of dazed, following the UN award. To be honest I didn't realise what the award actually meant. In the evening on 10 July I got to know from a Plan staff that I won the "UN Youth Courage Award for Education," but I hardly knew what it meant and whether I should be happy or proud.

But pretty soon I began to appear on newspapers and television and people of my village and the neighbouring ones would throng in to our home "to see me". I could see love and affection in their eyes when they would tell me excitedly that they saw my photo in a certain newspaper or on TV. I felt so good then. I want to keep on doing my work just to see those joyous and proud faces.

And as far as message is concerned here is mine. There are many children and youth like me and many more would be Keshobs all over the country. All they need is a little guidance. Give us this support and we will rid Bangladesh of child marriage.

কেশব রায়

Keshob Roy

Child Rights Advocate

Winner of* Youth Courage Award for Education from the UN

**Youth Courage Award for Education, introduced this year (2013) by the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Global Education, Gordon Brown, was awarded to seven youths from around the world to recognise their leadership role in promoting education. The award was announced on Malala Day (12 July). Keshob Roy (18 and from Nilphamari) is one of the seven youths and the only Bangladeshi.*



FOREWORD

CHILD MARRIAGE SURVEY IN BANGLADESH

It's my pleasure to share with you all Plan Bangladesh's national survey on child marriage.

Child marriage is one of the most serious problems facing girls in Bangladesh today, with well over half of girls getting married before they reach 18. It forces a child to become a wife and belong to her husband and his family; it often forces a child to become a mother when she is merely a child herself, damaging her health; it forces a child to need to care for a baby when she still needs support to care for herself. As a result of her marriage, many doors will close for a girl including her chance to go to school, which will be seriously diminished.

It doesn't need to be this way. Children are not just the future leaders of today, they are the generation of right now. It's our duty and responsibility to see them grow, to help them realise their true potential. By forcing them into an early marriage, we force them into a predestined life which cuts off many of their hopes and dreams. In my work to stop child marriage in Bangladesh, I have come across many girls for whom it is too late. As wives I see how they have a weight of responsibility and burden on their shoulders when they should be enjoying the innocence of childhood. This is clearly a human rights violation.

As child marriage gains international attention, I am pleased to see that many are recognising it as the huge developmental obstacle that it is. I strongly urge that ending child marriage remains as a global goal and national target in the post-2015 agenda.¹ We need to join forces and act now, so that we can put an end to this harmful practice and ensure that all girls can achieve their rights. If we want to see an equal world for girls and women, if we want to see empowerment, we need to start first by ending child marriage.

I hope that through this report we will be able to increase understanding on the drivers of child marriage so that we can work as one to put an end to it. Together, I believe, we can make a difference.

Yours sincerely,

Mingming Remata-Evora

Country Director, Plan International Bangladesh

¹As at the time of publication, 'End Child Marriage' is goal 2b under Goal 2 on 'Empower Girls and Women and Achieve Gender Parity' in *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development*

**“It seemed
I had no way out.”**

- Arjina, 19

was just 12 years old when her parents told her she had to get married.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“It seemed I had no way out.” Arjina, 19, was just 12 years old when her parents told her she had to get married.

Child marriage is a violation of human rights. It adversely affects education, health and wellbeing of girls and perpetuates cycles of poverty. Child brides experience the detrimental physical, psychological and social consequences of child marriage. This is a global phenomenon and a grave cause for concern.

Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. This survey shows that in Bangladesh, **64%** of women currently aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18. This is despite the fact that the minimum legal age of marriage for females in Bangladesh is 18 years and 21 for males.

There are multiple reasons for child marriage in Bangladesh which don't vary significantly across geographical area. Marriage is widely considered a family matter and this survey finds that in Bangladesh it is most common for the father to make the decision regarding his daughter's marriage. The practice is deeply embedded in culture. Parents and wider family members may believe that by arranging marriages with a groom they perceive to be suitable, they are providing girls with social and economic security, and protecting them from harm, including sexual harassment. The financial pressure associated with the practice of dowry is also a driver - dowry prices often increase the older a girl becomes.² This increase is associated with the cultural perception that a girl will become less attractive with age. Girls from families of poor socio-economic status and those living in rural areas are also more likely to become child brides.

This survey finds that a lack of education is strongly associated with levels of child marriage. Not only is this an additional driver, marriage under the age of 18 also deprives girls of their right to education. Many girls drop out of school after entering wedlock. Another adverse effect of child marriage is early pregnancy and

childbirth. These can have detrimental and long-term health effects on girls whose bodies are not developed enough to give birth, and also increase health risks to the newborn.

The government of Bangladesh and its development partners have prioritised delaying age at first marriage, recognising the impact that child marriage can have on achieving almost every Millennium Development Goal (MDG). This survey reveals that the trend of child marriage in Bangladesh is declining, particularly with regard to marriages under 15 years of age. However, this decline is slow. It is therefore essential that more is done to end this harmful practice in Bangladesh.

Plan International, an international child rights organisation, has been working in Bangladesh since 1994. **Plan's programming to stop child marriage aims to support girls to realise their right to quality education and to help them to achieve economic prosperity.** It also aims to improve their social standing in a society that values them as equal to boys. The organisation has assisted the government of Bangladesh in implementing an online birth registration system. This is essential in stopping the falsification of girls' ages, as often declaring the bride's age is all that is required for a marriage to take place.



² Dowry is the payment of sums of money by the bride's family to the groom.

This report presents findings from a national survey commissioned by Plan International Bangladesh and conducted by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b) and Associates for Community and Population Research (ACPR). The objective of the study was to understand the present situation of child marriage in the country and identify causes of, and factors associated with, the practice. This report also presents findings from focus group discussions with adolescent boys and key stakeholders within the community. The report is intended for use by international and national policy makers, UN agencies, NGOs, and academics. It includes recommendations for action to strengthen efforts to end child marriage in Bangladesh.

Summary of key findings

The survey reveals the prevalence and changing trend in child marriage in Bangladesh. It also shows associations with education and wealth, among others. Key findings include:

- ▶ **The prevalence of child marriage is still high in Bangladesh. 64% of all women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18.**
- ▶ There are lower rates of child marriage among younger women compared to older women suggesting that child marriage rates are decreasing.
- ▶ **There is a positive correlation between location (urban/rural) and child marriage. The rate of child marriage among all women aged 20–24 years was 54% in urban areas, compared with 71% in rural areas.**
- ▶ Education is strongly associated with child marriage. 86% of women with no education were married before 18 years of age, compared to 26% of women who had completed secondary or higher education.
- ▶ **It is most common for the father of the bride to make decisions regarding the marriage of their daughters.**
- ▶ There is a correlation between location (rural/urban) and awareness of legal age limits. 45% of women in rural areas who were surveyed, and 55% of women in urban areas who were surveyed were aware of the legal age of marriage.
- ▶ **Employment at time of marriage is associated with lower rates of child marriage (57% employed versus 70% unemployed at time of marriage).**

Recommendations for action

This report makes a number of recommendations to strengthen efforts towards ending child marriage in Bangladesh:

1. Enforce legal processes to stop child marriage

The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and the Ministry of Law, Justice & Parliamentary Affairs should enforce legal processes to stop child marriage and involve the community in this process. One mechanism for doing so is sensitising local Union Parishad members and Chairmen on child marriage issues. This will enable them to assist law enforcement agencies in preventing child marriage. This should go hand in hand with a series of other measures.


2. Implement on-line birth registration across the country

The Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives should ensure that the online birth registration system is implemented across the country so that girls' correct ages will be known and the falsification of ages will be prevented. This will enable legal steps to be taken by law enforcement agencies to stop child marriage.

3. Improve girls' safety in communities, including through national and community-based child protection systems and mechanisms

Strengthen national child protection systems, which are vital to helping to prevent and respond to child marriage. Community-based child protection mechanisms should also be strengthened and increased, and embedded in the union level Standing Committee for Women and Children.³

³ Plan's work with Child Protection Groups consisting of influential members of the community has led to appropriate prevention measures in a timely manner.



The key consequence of child marriage was stated as grave health consequences, particularly due to early child bearing

4. Increase the awareness of families and communities, especially fathers

The survey has shown that parents and fathers in particular, are the main decision-makers regarding girls' marriage. There therefore needs to be concerted efforts, both at the national and the community level, to highlight the negative consequences of child marriage to fathers themselves, including increasing awareness and understanding of the health implications for their daughters and grandchildren. Extended family members may also influence decision-making processes. Therefore, interventions should involve all members of the wider community.

5. Foster children's agency in preventing child marriage

Children themselves should be engaged to stop child marriage in their communities. They should be made

aware of their rights and supported to take action through children's organisations to raise awareness on the detrimental effects of child marriage to families and local leaders, reporting cases when necessary.

6. Involve men and boys as key agents to stop child marriage

The **role of men and boys** in challenging child marriage and raising awareness among their families, peers and communities of the negative effects of child marriage is a vital part of efforts to eliminate the practice. Boys' peer groups should be established to increase awareness of the issues surrounding child marriage and to act as a cadre group to prevent the harassment of girls.



7. Invest in girls' education

The survey highlights that child marriage results in girls dropping out of school. It is highly important to emphasise the importance of education to parents and communities. Girls should be supported to continue their education and to transition successfully from primary to secondary schooling and complete their secondary education.

8. Invest in adolescents' sexual and reproductive health

Survey respondents cited serious health impacts as one of the key consequences of child marriage, particularly due to early child bearing. All adolescents must have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive sexual and reproductive health information and services. Such services – including psychosocial support as part of integrated health services for adolescents – should be accessible to all adolescents and youth.



01

INTRODUCTION

“Child marriage is one of the worst violations of a child’s rights imaginable. It especially affects girls, robbing them of their childhood.”

- Myrna Evora, Country Director, Plan International Bangladesh

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the right to “free and full” consent to marriage. It acknowledges that this standard is not met when a person is not mature enough to make an informed decision (UNICEF, 2005). The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) contains a provision calling for the abolishment of traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children. Both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) specifically stipulate that marriage should require free and full consent. CEDAW, which is ratified by 186 countries, explicitly states that “the betrothal and marriage of a child shall have no legal effect” (Article 16.2). **A minimum age of marriage of 18 for both girls and boys is recommended by the committees of both CEDAW and the CRC.** The CRC Committee has recommended that “States Parties review and, where necessary, reform their legislation and practice to increase the minimum age for marriage with and without parental consent to 18 years, for both boys and girls”. In light of early childbearing that tends to result from child marriage, the CEDAW Committee has cogently emphasized the negative effects child marriage has on the education and employment of girls and women, stating that **“the responsibilities that women have to bear and raise children affect their right of access to education, employment and other activities related to their personal development. They also impose inequitable burdens of work on women.”**

Plan’s definition of child marriage:

Plan defines children as anyone under the age of 18. Therefore Plan defines child marriage as any marriage – whether under civil, religious or customary law, and with or without formal registration – where either one or both spouses are children under the age of 18.

1.1 Child marriage in Bangladesh

“I was married at the age of 13 and I became a mother to my son at the age of 14. My husband was 30 years old when we married.”

- Ami Zan, 60 years old, Bangladesh

Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world (UNFPA, 2012). Child marriage is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), **“over 67 million women aged 20–24 had been married or in union before their eighteenth birthday. Asia (excluding China) accounted for half of these child brides”**. Although the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18 years for girls, the 2007 Demographic and Health Survey showed that the median age at first marriage for females aged 20–24 was 16.4 years (National Institute of Population Research and Training, Mitra and Associates, and Macro International, 2010, p.78). This is despite the fact that the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) in Bangladesh states that child marriage is punishable. However, the penalties are weak, with only imprisonment of up to one month, or a fine equivalent to roughly \$12.50, or both (Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2010).

There are multiple factors which place Bangladeshi girls at risk of child marriage. These include economic pressures related to dowry payments (sums of money paid by the bride’s family to the groom) and the belief that marriage will provide girls with social and economic security. Traditional gender norms such as the social and cultural values placed on morality, female virginity, and family honour are also influential as child marriage is often perceived as a means of controlling female sexual behaviour and untoward attention towards young females by men.

A lack of implementation and enforcement of marriage laws also contribute to rates of child marriage. Until recently, when the Birth and Death Registration Act was amended in 2004, most marriages in Bangladesh were not officially registered. Many parents falsified girls’ ages to conform to the marriage law, enabling marriage before legally acceptable. This was less challenging in rural areas as many births were not registered and many people did not have birth certificates and demonstrable proof of age.

There are perceived financial and social benefits of child marriage within Bangladesh. Young girls are often regarded as an economic burden to their families who fear that dowry prices will increase the older a girl becomes (Brown, 2012, p.14). Younger adolescent brides often fetch smaller dowries (UNICEF, 2013). In rural areas especially, parents arrange child marriages in the hope that this will benefit the family by reducing the financial burden that a girl may present (Barkat and Majid, 2003). This can also be explained by the fact that after marriage, a girl is likely to move into her new husband’s home (Brown, 2012, p.14).

Global demographic trends indicate that the longer a girl is in school, the more likely it is that she will delay age at first marriage (Gyimah, 2009). These improvements can be attributed to efforts by the government of Bangladesh to facilitate girls’ education at both primary and secondary levels. However, child marriage rates still remain high, influenced by factors at the local level including discrimination against women and socio-cultural norms (Feld and Hayes, 2009).

1.2 The consequences of child marriage

“My first son died and I was abused by my in-laws,”

says Nargis, 19, who lives in Gazipur District with her husband Khorshed.

“Now I have another son but he is malnourished.”

Plan believes that child marriage is a violation of children’s rights as it often has profound consequences on children’s survival, health, education, development and well-being and is often carried out against their will and best interests.⁴ It can have particularly devastating impacts on the lives of girls. These impacts can be physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional. Girls who are married early are more likely to experience violence, abuse and forced sexual relations, are more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), have reduced levels of sexual and reproductive health and lower levels of education with corresponding high rates of illiteracy⁵. Child marriage is often accompanied by early pregnancy, with much higher risks of maternal mortality and morbidity for girls who become pregnant at a young age⁶. **The psychological impacts of child marriage can be significant for both boys and girls. Child marriage can mean that children are disconnected from their parents and close relatives, leaving them isolated and vulnerable, without necessary support in dealing with marriage, parenthood, domestic duties and supporting a family⁷.**



⁴ A girl’s right to say no to marriage: Working to end child marriage and keep girls in school, Woking: Plan International, 2013

⁵ Ending child marriage. A guide for global policy action. IPPF, UNFPA, The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, 2006

⁶ State of the World’s Children, Realizing the Rights of Adolescents, UNICEF, 2011

⁷ Stealing Innocence: Child Marriage and gender inequality in Pakistan, Åbo Akademi University, Institute for Human Rights, and Plan Finland

1.3 Efforts to end child marriage: Plan International Bangladesh's programme

Plan International Bangladesh, an international child rights organisation, has been working in the country since 1994. Stopping child marriage is a core area of the organisation's work, with the aim of supporting girls to realise their right to quality education and to help them achieve economic prosperity. It also aims to improve their social standing in a society which values them as equal to boys. Several districts and sub-districts of Bangladesh have been declared child marriage free (see Box 1).

Box 1: Child marriage free zones

Stopping child marriage has been a key area of Plan International Bangladesh's work since 2005. In the organisation's Country Strategic Plan 2010–2015, reduction of child marriage in rural areas is a programme objective. The aim is to increase girls' mean age at marriage from 15 to 18 years in all programme areas by 2015. In order to achieve this objective, Plan International Bangladesh is strengthening government mechanisms by supporting the development of an online Birth Registration Information System, which aims to prevent the tampering of birth dates to falsify the age of a girl at marriage. The organisation is also supporting the enforcement of the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) through awareness raising on the existence of the Act.

These efforts have resulted in considerable achievements. Plan International Bangladesh is close to achieving 100% online birth registration in all programme areas. In its intervention areas, 57% of women are married before the age of 18, which is less than the national average of 64%. Other key activities include awareness building and motivating relevant stakeholders to take responsibility for stopping child marriage.

'Child Marriage Free Zone' is a movement led by local government which aims to stop child marriage. It is facilitated by Plan International Bangladesh and other NGOs, local government institutions, religious leaders, marriage registrars, children's organisations, and members of the community. A zone is defined as a Union, which is the smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh, headed by the local government body, Union Parishad.⁸ Child Marriage Free Zones have been declared in 22 unions in which Plan International Bangladesh works, through sustained dialogue and action spanning 3-5 years.

Once a formal declaration of "from today this union is child marriage free" is made by the Union Parishad, all are committed to work collectively to stop child marriage. Plan International Bangladesh has undertaken key interventions with communities, including the formation of Child Protection Groups (CPG) with support from Union Parishads and the government law enforcement agency. These groups consist of influential members of the community and act as a watchdog within Plan intervention areas on child abuse cases, including child marriage, serving as community-based child protection mechanisms. The Child Protection Group members possess strong skills to influence the prevention of child marriages. They also have access to health, legal and other services to enable a prompt response to reported cases. There are, for example, families who will secretly take their daughters outside of the Union to get them married, when they are below the age of 18.

Key to the child marriage free zones are Children's Organisations which are widely promoted by Plan International Bangladesh. These provide life skills training to empower children in negotiating and delaying child marriage in their communities. The children go to different houses to increase the awareness of parents regarding the harm that can result from child marriage. They also participate in regular meetings to alert other group members of any suspected cases, or those at risk of child marriage. They then take action or report the suspected cases to elders in the community. Other interventions include a leaflet and billboard campaign to raise awareness and increase motivation to act to stop child marriage.

This movement has led to a remarkable reduction in the incidence of child marriage in the areas where Plan works. Since 2005, 22 out of 39 unions in Plan International Bangladesh's coverage areas in the Lalmonirhat, Dinajpur, Nilphamari and Gazipur districts have been declared as "child marriage free". This is coverage of a total population of 596,653 population, of which 147,400 are girls under 18.

Plan International's "child marriage free zones" were recommended as a model for scale-up in the UN Special Envoy for Global Education's recommendations for education financing during the April 2013 Learning for All Ministerial summit (17-19th April, Washington, DC), hosted by the World Bank.

Adapted from Parveen and Sarkar (2013)

⁸ Unions are the lowest administrative units in the rural area having a population of 24,000 to 25,000, which is divided into three wards (9,000 to 10,000 populations in each)

1.4 Objectives

This report presents the findings of a national survey on child marriage in Bangladesh. The survey was commissioned by Plan International Bangladesh as part of an initiative to prevent child marriage. It was conducted by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research in Bangladesh (icDDR,b) and Associates for Community and Population Research (ACPR).

The objectives of the national level survey were:

- To understand the present situation of child marriage in the country and identify causes of, and factors associated with, the practice.
- To assist Plan International Bangladesh in modifying its existing interventions on child marriage in programme areas, and to replicate these activities in other areas. The study also aimed to enhance policy and advocacy to prevent child marriage in Bangladesh.



**Child Marriage Free Zone’
is a movement
led by local government
which aims to stop child marriage.**

**It is facilitated by
Plan International Bangladesh
and other NGOs,
Local government institutions,
religious leaders,
marriage registrars,
Child Organisations
and members of the community.**

This report is based on findings from data collected during a national survey in Bangladesh. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Findings from focus group discussions with community leaders and adolescent boys are included.

The national survey data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire between July and August 2012 by trained interviewers from ACPR. Stratified sampling (using a multi-stage cluster design) was applied to select the samples because it is one of the best sampling techniques used for selecting a representative sample, especially in large surveys. While multi-stage ensures representativeness, stratification gives an adequate sample from significant stratum (in this case urban and rural stratum). This technique has been used for national surveys like all Bangladesh Demographic and Health Surveys, Bangladesh Maternal Mortality Surveys (2001 and 2010) and the Urban Health Survey in 2006.

Data was collected from all seven administrative divisions of Bangladesh. In rural areas, 90 unions were selected randomly out of a total 4,044 unions. From these selected unions, 90 villages were again selected randomly (one per union). From each village, 30 completed interviews were done. Similarly, 90 wards⁹ were randomly selected from a total of 2420 wards. From each of the 90 wards, one moholla (cluster of households in the urban areas which usually follows road boundaries) was randomly selected. From each moholla, 30 interviews were completed.

The survey focused on key issues surrounding child marriage: age at marriage and the factors associated with child marriage, status of marriage registration, and consent taking. The survey also explored reasons for child marriage, knowledge of the legal age of marriage, perceptions of the consequences of child marriage and suggestions for its prevention. Information was collected on first marriages during the survey.

During the national survey a total of **5,367** married women of reproductive age (15–49 years) were interviewed. Of these women, **2,679** were from rural areas and **2,688** from urban areas. According to a previous survey, the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) in 2007, the prevalence of child marriage then was **66%** (percentage of women age 20–24 who were first married by age 18). The same report also presented rural-urban differences in child marriage (“Urban women age 25–49 tend to marry one year later”). Although the primary objective of the present study was to estimate the national prevalence of child marriage, given that there is evidence of a significant difference in the prevalence by urban and rural residency, analysis was designed to present the data by these two strata.

Where there was more than one married woman of reproductive age in a household, the youngest was selected for interview (see Annex for sample frame). The effect of stratification (urban versus rural) needed to be adjusted with appropriate weights during analysis as around **80%** of the population in Bangladesh live in rural areas

⁹ In urban areas, there are no unions but wards are the administrative units, which vary in size in different geographical locations.

compared to **20%** in urban areas (World Bank, 2011). Moreover, to adjust the effect of selecting a younger sample (for more than 2 eligible respondents in one household), weighted analysis was needed.

Determination of an appropriate sample size is a key to the success of any field operation. In this survey the sample size is determined using a well-known statistical formula in order to estimate child marriage prevalence in both rural and urban areas separately. As stated above, the national prevalence of child marriage (i.e. the proportion of women marrying before age 18) was 66% in 2007 (BDHS 2007). It was assumed that a national estimate of the current prevalence of child marriage is 56% (Percentage of women age 20-24 who were first married by age 18) assuming a 10% reduction in child marriage from 2007.¹⁰ Then sample size was calculated with a 5% precision; assuming a design effect of 2 (higher design effect since between cluster variation will be more); a 15% non-response rate and stratified by the urban-rural residence. It was also assumed that the prevalence of child marriage in urban settings was 12% lower than the rural.

Table 1 demonstrates the background characteristics of the women in the survey. The mean age of survey participants was 28 years (30 years in rural areas and 29 years in urban areas). Overall, 10% of women in rural and urban areas were aged 15–19 years. 20% of women overall were aged 20–24 years, and 4% of women were aged 45–49 years.

32% of women overall who participated in the survey had not received a formal education. This figure was higher in rural compared to urban areas (36% and 18%, respectively). Secondary or higher education completion rates are significantly higher in urban than rural areas (22% and 6%, respectively). At the time of the survey, a higher percentage of women in urban areas were employed (14%) in contrast to rural areas (8%) (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of the background characteristics of women surveyed

Background characteristic	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
Age of the respondents:				
15–19	10.0	9.2	9.8	526
20–24	18.7	22.7	19.6	1051
25–29	22.7	24.4	23.1	1238
30–34	19.6	17.6	19.2	1029
35–39	14.2	12.7	13.9	745
40–44	10.5	8.5	10.1	542
45–49	4.3	4.9	4.4	236
Mean (Age)	29.9	29.4	27.8	5367
Educational attainment:				
No education	35.7	18.3	32.0	1717
Did not complete primary school	13.0	7.0	11.8	631
Completed primary school	14.5	16.4	14.9	800
Did not complete secondary school	30.5	36.5	31.8	1706
Completed secondary or higher education	6.2	21.9	9.6	514
Employment status				
Yes	8.0	14.3	9.3	500

¹⁰This assumption is based on reviewing trends over time related to changes in norms, values and practice from social studies in Bangladesh.



Five focus group discussions were held with community leaders in order to understand their perceptions of the causes of child marriage and how it can be prevented. **A total of 36 community leaders** participated (31 males and 5 females). The community leaders were from a range of backgrounds and professions Parishad members, religious leaders, teachers, retired government officers, and other respected community members.¹¹ The focus groups were conducted in Plan International Bangladesh's programme areas.

Five focus group discussions were also held with adolescent boys to gain an understanding of their attitudes towards child marriage and their knowledge of the legal minimum age of marriage in the country. The focus groups also explored their understanding of marriage registration and their perceptions of the consequences of child marriage. **A total of 29 boys aged 15–29 participated in the discussions.** There were between 6 and 7 participants in each focus group. The majority of the boys were students. These were conducted in Plan International Bangladesh's rural programme areas.

In addition, interviews were conducted with two young women who had successfully resisted their child marriages. Their families were also interviewed. These young women were identified by the community as “survivors” of child marriage. The interviews explored their experiences and how their marriages were prevented. They also explored their aspirations. The findings are presented as a case study (see Box 2).

Study Limitations

A limitation of this study is that issues such as the extent to which the women were able to make their own decisions regarding their child marriage could not be explored due to the quantitative nature of the national survey.

¹¹ Union Parishads (UP) or just 'Union' are the smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh. A Union Parishad is the body responsible primarily for administrative, law and order and community development within the local limits of the union (Parveen and Sarkar, 2013).



03

CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH: KEY FINDINGS

This section presents key findings using data from the national survey. It also details findings from focus group discussions with adolescent boys and community leaders. The story of two women who successfully prevented their own child marriages is also included.

3.1 Age at first marriage

2% of women were married before the age of 11

Table 2 presents the age at first marriage of women who participated in the survey. Overall, 1.6% of women were married before the age of 11 (1.6% in rural areas, 1.3% in urban areas). 30.6% of women overall were married between the ages of 12 and 14 (32.9% of in rural areas, 22.2% in urban areas). It was most common for women to marry between the ages of 15–19 years. The figure for this age group is 59.2% overall (58.9% in rural areas and 60.7% in urban areas). Only 1% of women were married between the ages of 25–49 (1% in rural areas and 3% in urban areas). The corresponding figure for the age group 20–24 is 7.3% overall (5.8% in rural areas and 12.8% in urban areas).

Table 2: Age at first marriage of women by residence (rural and urban areas)

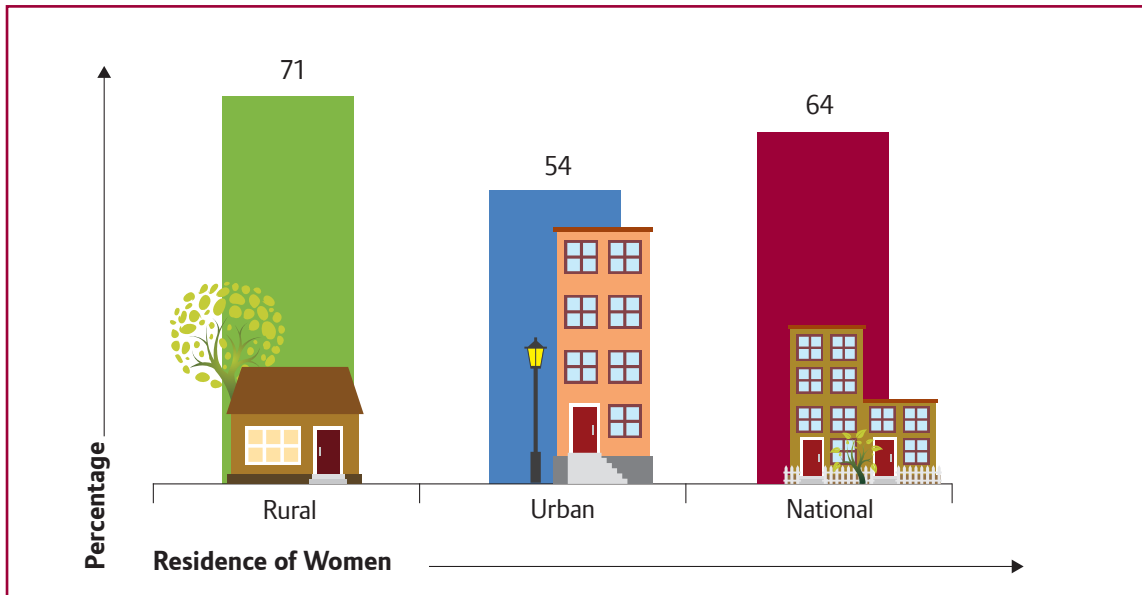
Age at first marriage:	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
<11	1.6	1.3	1.6	83
12–14	32.9	22.2	30.6	1643
15–19	58.9	60.7	59.3	3182
20–24	5.8	12.8	7.3	393
25–49	1.0	3.0	1.2	67

3.2 The prevalence of child marriage

64% of all females¹² aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18

In Bangladesh, 64% of all women aged 20–24¹³, who were surveyed, were married before the age of 18 (Figure 1). Not surprisingly there are disparities between rural and urban areas, with higher proportions of women in rural areas marrying before the age of 18. 71% of women aged 20–24 years were married before the age of 18 in rural areas. The figure for urban areas is 54%.

Figure 1: Percentage of all women aged 20–24 who were married before the age of 18, by urban/rural



3.3 Trends in child marriage

There has been a decrease in marriage at a young age, particularly before the age of 15

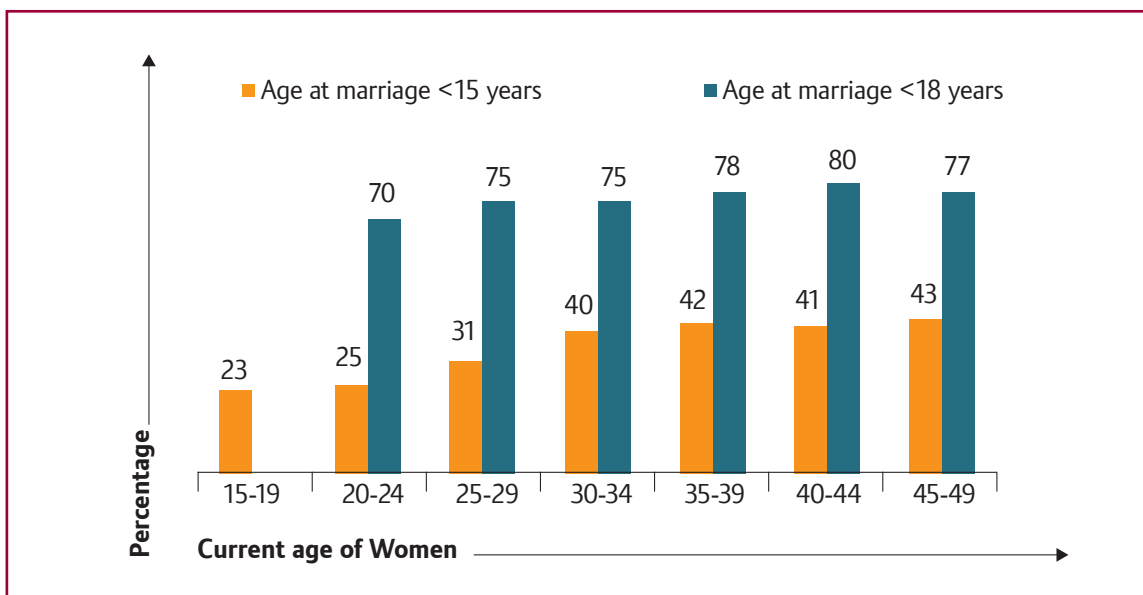
The survey findings suggest there has been a decrease in marriage at a young age, particularly before the age of 15. Rates of child marriage tend to be lower among younger women than those in older age groups. Figure 2 shows the percentage of currently married women¹⁴ who were married before 15 years, and before 18 years of age. 77% of women currently aged 45–49 were married before they turned 18; the corresponding figure for women who are currently aged 20–24 is 70%. There is a more noticeable decline in marriages before 15 years of age. 43% of women currently aged 45–59 were married before they reached 15, in comparison to 23% of women in the age group 15–19 years.

¹² All females/women include currently married, widow, abandoned, divorced, etc.

¹³ Our study uses the group of 20–24 year olds as recommended by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). This was done in order to capture the current practice related to child marriage rather than collecting information of married women who are older ages (e.g. 40–49).

¹⁴ This figure includes women who are currently married and it excludes women who are widow, divorced or abandoned.

Figure 2: Percentage of currently married women, married by specific ages (<15 years, <18 years)

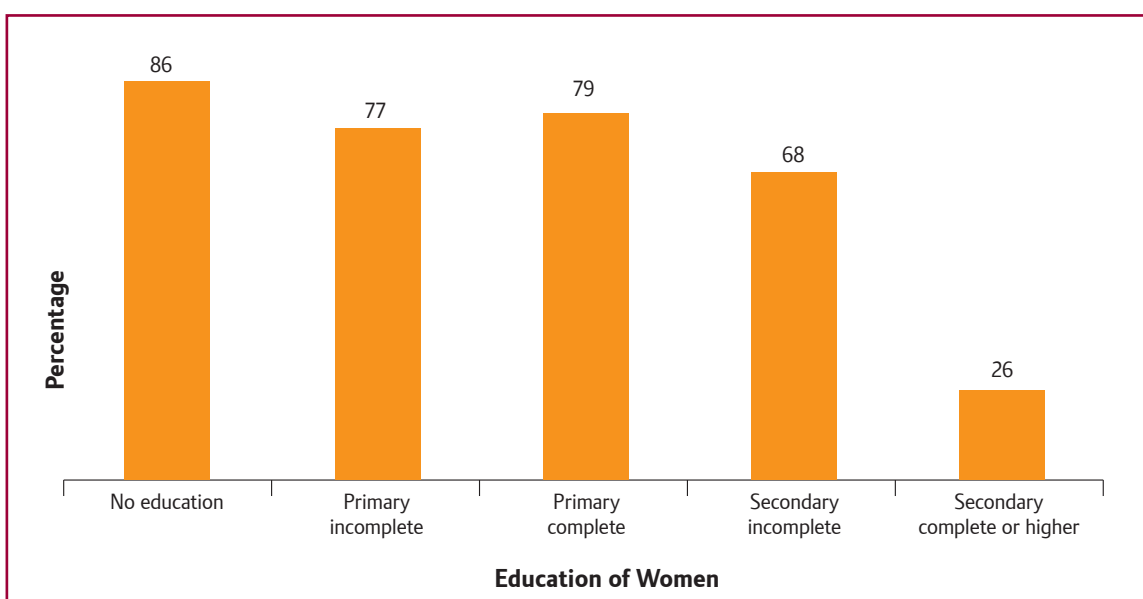


3.4 Lack of Education: a driver of child marriage

86% of women married under 18 were not educated (currently aged 20–24)

The survey shows that there is a very strong association between child marriage and education. Figure 3 displays the percentage of currently married women aged 20–24 who were married before the age of 18, by educational attainment. Of women in the age group 20–24 who were married before 18 years of age, 86% had received no education. In contrast, only 26% of women who married under 18 years had completed secondary or higher education.

Figure 3: Percentage of currently married women aged 20–24 who were married before the age of 18, by educational attainment



3.5 Child marriage and household wealth

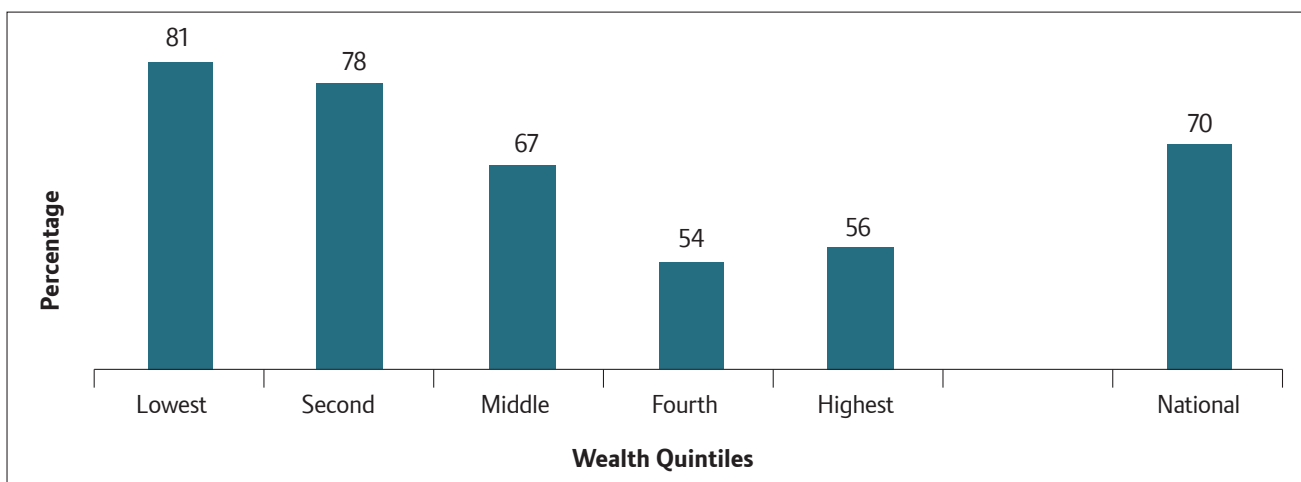
“I didn’t want to give my first daughter in marriage, but economic circumstances forced me to. My husband had been sick for two years and we were very, very poor. I had to give her away when she was 14 as we could not afford to keep her.”

- Ami Zan, 60 years old, Gazipur, Bangladesh

81% of currently married women aged 20–24 are in the lowest wealth quintile

Child marriage is strongly associated with poor socio-economic status. Figure 4 shows the percentage of currently married women aged 20–24, represented by wealth quintiles. 81% of currently married women aged 20–24 are in the lowest wealth quintile. 56% of currently married women aged 20–24 are in the highest wealth quintile. This suggests that girls from families of poor socio-economic status are more likely to be married before the age of 18.

Figure 4: Percentage of currently married women aged 20–24 by wealth quintiles



3.6 The groom: background characteristics

During the survey women were asked about their husbands’ educational attainment and employment status at the time of marriage (Table 3). 41.6% of husbands in rural areas were not educated; the corresponding figure for urban areas is 19.6%. A higher proportion of women in urban areas reported that their husbands completed secondary or higher education (37.2% and 12.3%, respectively). It was significantly more common for husbands to be employed (94.9% overall) than unemployed (5.1% overall).

Table 3: Grooms’ educational attainment and employment status

Profile of husbands	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
Education				
No education	41.6	19.6	36.9	1980
Primary incomplete	8.7	5.0	7.9	426
Primary complete	15.3	13.3	14.9	799
Secondary incomplete	22.1	24.9	22.7	1217
Secondary complete or higher	12.3	37.2	17.6	946
Employment status				
Employed	94.4	97.0	94.9	5094
Not employed	5.6	3.0	5.1	273

3.7 The reasons for child marriage

“Behind our parents’ decisions to marry girls young is poverty – extreme poverty. If our parents get a good offer, sometimes it is very difficult to change their minds.”

- Oli is 12 years old. He is a member of Plan’s children’s group in Bangladesh, raising awareness of the impact of early and forced marriage on girls.

60% of women overall reported that the wish of parents or family was the reason for their marriage

The national survey examined the reasons women reported for their own marriages. Multiple responses were considered in the survey due to the expected multiple reasons which influence the occurrence of child marriage. Overall, these were similar in urban and rural areas (Table 4).

It is apparent that a bride’s family is very influential in marriage. The most commonly reported reason for child marriage in rural and urban areas was that it was the wish of the parents or family (60% overall). The availability of a groom deemed “suitable” was the second most commonly reported reason for marriage (53% overall). The perception that the girl was at an appropriate age for marriage was also reported by 22% of women overall. The groom’s family are also influential, with 14% of respondents in rural and urban areas combined reporting this as a reason. The same figure (14% overall) is found for financial problems as a reason for child marriage.

Disaggregation by urban and rural areas shows that financial problems are more commonly reported as a reason for child marriage in rural compared to urban areas (16% and 7%, respectively).

4.1% of women surveyed overall reported the reason for marriage as the girl’s own choice, ie it is her decision to choose her partner although the parents may or may not give consent for this decision. The figure for girls marrying of their own choice was higher in urban areas (9.1%) than in rural areas (4.1%).

Overall, 2% of women reported fear of dowry as a reason for child marriage. This can be explained by the common notion that the dowry payment will increase the older a girl becomes. Therefore a girl married at a younger age may be considered less of a financial burden to the family.

Although not shown in the table, results from bivariate analysis have identified that employment at time of marriage was also associated with lower rates of child marriage (57% employed versus 70% unemployed).

Table 4: Reported reasons for child marriage

	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
Reasons for arranging marriage*				
Suitable groom available	51.9	56.6	52.9	2840
Social insecurity	7.5	4.0	6.7	361
Financial problem	15.9	7.0	14.0	750
Wish of parents/family	62.2	51.6	60.0	3219
Marriageable age of the girl	22.4	21.2	22.2	1189
Wish of the grooms’ family	14.7	11.8	14.1	756
Fear of dowry	2.0	1.4	1.9	100
Completed education	0.6	0.8	0.6	33
Social pressure to get married	2.5	1.5	2.3	122
Girl wants to get married	4.1	9.1	5.2	277
Other	0.1	0.0	0.1	5

* Multiple responses considered

3.8. Empowerment in decision-making and consent giving

3.8.1 Decision-making in reality and ideally

The national survey explored women’s perceptions of the ideal person to make decisions regarding marriage. **A girl’s parents are perceived to be most appropriate by majority in both rural and urban areas of the country** (63% and 58%, respectively). 14% of women in rural areas and 25% in urban areas perceived girls themselves to be the ideal person to make decisions regarding marriage. **In reality, the father of the bride is the most common decision-maker with regards to child marriage in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh** (77.2% and 70.6%, respectively). It is less common for the mother of the bride to make the decision (8.1% in rural areas and 9% in urban areas). Although to a lesser extent, other family members such as the bride’s brother or sister, or grandfather and grandmother, are also influential in these decisions.

Table 5: Decision-making on marriage

Actual decision maker for marriage	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
Father	77.2	70.6	75.8	4067
Mother	8.1	9.0	8.3	444
Grandfather/Grandmother	1.0	1.3	1.1	58
Brother/sister	5.9	6.0	5.9	316
Brother in-law/sister-in-law	1.0	0.8	1.0	53
Other relatives	2.8	3.1	2.9	153
Herself (referred as “love marriage”)	3.9	9.1	5.0	268
Others	0.2	0.1	0.1	7
Perceptions regarding the ideal decision maker for marriage				
Self	14.1	24.8	16.4	880
Mother	2.2	1.9	2.1	114
Father	14.4	10.4	13.5	726
Parents	62.9	58.2	61.9	3322
Family members	6.4	4.7	6.0	323
Others	0.0	0.0	0.0	1

3.8.4 Consent taking before marriage and marriage registration

“First, I did not know what to do to change the family decision. We had a conversation and I stopped eating. It seemed I had no way out.”

- Arjina, 19, was just 12 years old when her parents told her to marry.

During the survey, women were asked whether their parents or guardians sought their consent to marriage before it took place. The results in Table 6 show that overall, 16.9% of women said that they did not give their consent prior to marriage. The corresponding figure for women who said they gave their consent to marriage is 78.9%. According to the survey, 3.2% of women made their own decision to get married. Higher proportions of women in rural areas did not provide their consent before marriage (18.5%), in comparison to 11% in urban areas. It must be noted that family pressure to marry is high and therefore consent does not necessarily mean that marriages were entered into freely and willingly, simply that there was acceptance of their family’s decision.





The survey also explored the status of women’s marriage registration at first marriage (Table 6). Overall, 80.7% of marriages were registered. It is more common for marriages to be registered at home (85.1% overall) than at the Kazi office (13.5% overall)¹⁵ but both of them are official registrations.

Table 6: Status and place of marriage registration, and status of consent taking

First marriage was registered	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
Yes	79.0	87.1	80.7	4334
No	21.0	12.9	19.3	1034
Place of Registration				
Kazi office	11.7	19.6	13.5	584
Home	87.0	79.4	85.1	3687
Other	1.3	1.0	1.4	61
Consent taken for marriage				
Yes	78.3	81.1	78.9	4234
No	18.5	11.0	16.9	908
Consent not needed (girl’s decision to marry)	3.2	7.9	4.2	227

¹⁵ The Kazi office is the authorised agency for marriage registration in Bangladesh.

3.9 The consequences of child marriage

3.9.1 Child marriage: a barrier to education and employment

“I was studying in grade 8 when child marriage shattered all my dreams.”

- Nargis, 19 years old, was 16 when her parents arranged for her to marry an older man in Bangladesh.

Not only is a lack of education a driver of child marriage, child marriage also results in girls dropping out of school, or not being able to adequately learn while there. Overall, 43% of women in the survey were students at the time of their marriage (Table 7). The figure is 44% for women in rural areas and 39.1% for women in urban areas. Overall, 75.7% of these women stopped going to school after they were married. This figure is higher in rural areas (79.9%) than in urban areas (61.9%). 62.2% of girls overall were not receiving scholarships at the time of marriage.

3.1% of women overall were working for cash or kind during the time of marriage. Of the women who were employed at the time of marriage, 30.9% did not continue to work after they entered wedlock.

Table 7: Effect of child marriage on continuing education, work and organisations

Student at the time of marriage	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
Yes	44.0	39.1	42.8	1569
No	56.0	60.9	57.2	2100
Continued school after marriage				
Yes	20.1	38.1	24.3	382
No	79.9	61.9	75.7	1187
Recipient of scholarship				
Yes	40.1	31.4	37.8	1388
No	59.9	68.6	62.2	2280
Working for cash or kind at the time of marriage				
Yes	2.6	4.9	3.1	165
No	97.4	95.1	96.9	5203
Continued work after marriage				
Yes	59.8	87.1	69.1	114
No	40.2	12.9	30.9	51
Involvement with any organisational activities				
Yes	0.5	0.4	0.4	24
No	99.5	99.6	99.6	5345
Continued membership after marriage				
Yes	76.5	81.7	77.4	18
No	23.5	18.3	22.6	5

3.9.2 Involvement with organisations

Another finding of the survey concerns the impact of marriage on women's involvement with organisations within Bangladesh. Table 7 shows that only a small number of women (24) were involved with activities within organisations. These activities were mainly under microcredit programmes of the organisations Grameen Bank and BRAC. 22.6% of these women discontinued their membership with organisations after marriage.

3.10 Awareness and perceptions: the causes and consequences of child marriage

This section presents the perceptions of women, adolescent boys, and community leaders regarding the causes and consequences of child marriage. It combines data from the national survey with findings from focus group discussions.

3.10.1 Knowledge of the minimum legal age for marriage

Table 8 shows that overall, just under half of women correctly knew the legal age for marriage (47.3%). Awareness of the legal age for getting married is higher in urban areas (the figure for rural areas is 45.2% and 54.9% for urban areas).

Adolescent boys were all aware of the legal age of marriage for both boys and girls within Bangladesh. When asked about their knowledge regarding the legal age, the boys referred to a number of sources. These included NGOs, Child Organisations, social programmes of organisations including Plan and Concerned Women for Family Development, and teachers.

Interestingly, community leaders were aware of the legal age of marriage for girls but were unsure of the legal age for boys getting married.

Table 8: Knowledge of the legal age for marriage

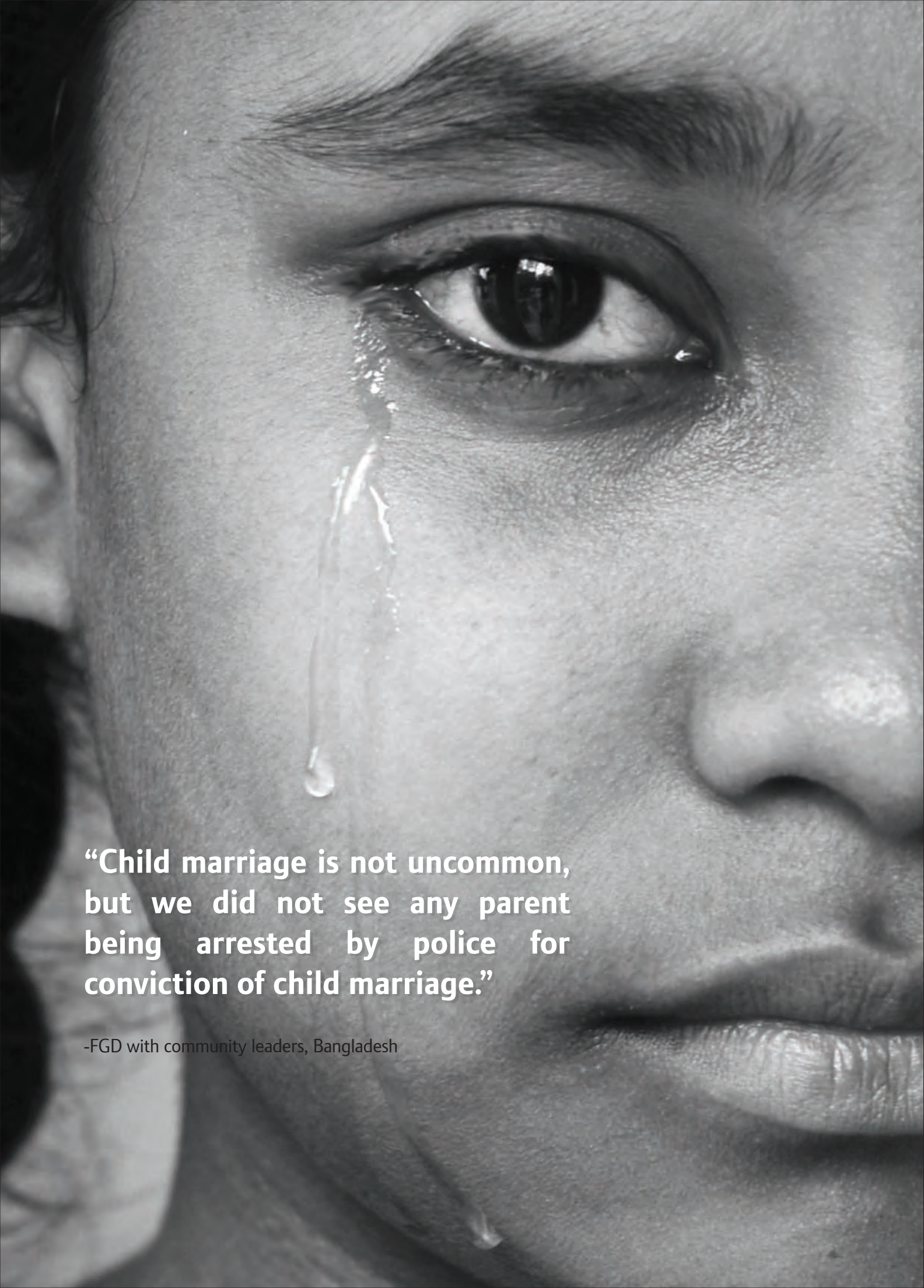
Knowledge of the legal age at marriage	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
Correctly knew the legal age of marriage	45.2	54.9	47.3	2537

3.10.2 Perceived reasons for child marriage

Financial problems within the family are the most commonly perceived reason for child marriage, cited by 62% of respondents overall.

The survey findings show women's perceptions of the reasons for child marriage. As Table 9 demonstrates, the most commonly cited reason was financial at 62.2% (59.6% in rural areas and 71.6% in urban areas). The second most common reason for child marriage perceived by women was a lack of feeling secure in terms of safety and free from harassment (44.3% rural and 43.6% in urban areas). Women also perceived problems within the family as a reason for child marriage (38.3% in rural areas and 35.3% in urban areas). Although to a lesser extent, a lack of awareness of the legal age of marriage was also cited (20.3% in rural areas and 17.0% in urban areas).

Overall, the perceptions of community leaders regarding the causes of child marriage are similar to those of women. They also explain the survey findings in more detail. The focus group discussions revealed that families experiencing financial difficulties, particularly those with a number of daughters, arrange child marriages. The community leaders also acknowledged that parents arrange marriage as a means of decreasing the risks of harassment faced by girls, in the community, in schools and even in workplaces.



“Child marriage is not uncommon, but we did not see any parent being arrested by police for conviction of child marriage.”

-FGD with community leaders, Bangladesh

The community leaders also stated that communities in Bangladesh arrange a girl’s marriage as early as possible to prevent dowry increasing with age:

“demand for dowry will increase with increasing age of the girl at the time of marriage.”

- FGD with community leaders, Bangladesh

This can be linked to the fear associated with a girl becoming less attractive with age, which is thought to increase the difficulty of finding a groom with good prospects, as found through vast discussions with community members through focus group discussions whereby they reiterated their opinion that as girls age, they are perceived to become less attractive to men.

Community members also discussed the urgency to arrange a marriage when a groom thought to be “suitable” is available. The financial status of a groom appears to constitute what is deemed as suitable:

“It would be difficult to find suitable [financially solvent] groom if somebody waits for long, so it is better to arrange marriage when such groom is available.”

- FGD with community leaders, Bangladesh

Almost all participants in the focus group thought that lack of knowledge regarding the legal age for getting married, and regarding the legal implications of child marriage, resulted in child marriages being arranged unknowingly.

The perceptions of adolescent boys regarding the causes of child marriage differ slightly to those of the women surveyed. The most commonly cited reason for child marriage reported by boys was a lack of education. Boys also reported a lack of social awareness and non-enforcement of law as reasons:

“Child marriage is not uncommon, but we did not see any parent being arrested by police for conviction of child marriage.”

- FGD with adolescent boys, Bangladesh

Similar to the perceptions of women, boys cited poverty as a cause of child marriage. They also stated that some parents consider their daughter a burden due to the issue of dowry payment. Boys acknowledged that a girl’s marriage before she reaches 18 is often valued by society, although they considered this perception as taboo.

Table 9: Perceived reasons for child marriage

	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of Women
Perceived reasons for child marriage				
Financial problems within the family	59.6	71.6	62.2	3338
Lack of safety from harassment	44.3	43.6	44.2	2370
Problems within the family	38.3	35.3	37.6	2020
Lack awareness of the legal age of marriage	20.3	17.0	19.6	1050
To prevent dowry increasing	10.8	12.3	11.1	595
Religious beliefs	5.3	2.8	4.8	257
Social pressure to marry	5.2	3.9	5.0	266
Family tradition	3.6	2.7	3.4	180
Unemployment	2.7	1.6	2.4	131
Other	1.0	0.7	0.9	49

3.10.3 Perceived consequences of child marriage

“I felt very stressed. I had been trying for a baby for 7 years. So this time when I was expecting, I felt worried for the baby. I had so many expectations to meet but I am only 18.”

Rani was married at the age of 11 and started trying for a baby immediately. She suffered birth complications and now experiences the long-term health consequences.



The most commonly cited consequence of child marriage was that it is bad for the woman's health (49% overall)

The survey asked women about the consequences of child marriage (Table 10). Irrespective of rural or urban areas, the most commonly cited consequence was that child marriage is bad for a woman's health, or increases the risk of becoming ill (49.9% rural and 46.8% urban, respectively). The other common consequences of child marriage reported by women in rural and urban areas were: early pregnancy (43.8% rural and 44.8% urban, respectively); risk of the expectant mother dying during delivery (29.1% rural and 36.5% urban, respectively), and that child marriage may negatively affect physical growth (27.1% rural and 29.6% urban, respectively).

These findings are consistent with discussions with adolescent boys, who perceived child marriage to have physical, health-related, and social effects. Almost all of the boys demonstrated awareness that if a girl marries early she is at risk of becoming pregnant, which can be harmful to the health of the mother and newborn. For example, some of the boys acknowledged that when a child bride becomes pregnant, her child may be born with deformities. Anaemia, becoming physically weak, and malnutrition were also cited as known consequences. Similarly, community leaders were aware of maternal and child deaths, and psychological problems as consequences of child marriage.

Within the focus groups, adolescent boys also demonstrated awareness that a child bride may not be able to meet the expectations placed upon her within the marital home. For example, her desire to play with friends may impact on her household chores. They recognised that this may lead to frequent quarrels, punishment, and violence within the home or divorce.

The boys also said that child marriage can alter a girl's physical appearance, with early childbearing making girls look older than their true age.

Table 10: Perceived consequences of child marriage

	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of Women
Perceived consequence of child marriage*				
Bad for health/risk of becoming sick	49.9	46.8	49.2	2641
Early pregnancy	43.8	44.8	44.0	2360
Mother may die during delivery	29.1	36.5	30.7	1648
Harmful for physical growth	27.1	29.6	27.7	1484
Child may die during delivery	23.1	17.4	21.9	1174
Difficult to uphold responsibilities	20.2	15.0	19.1	1024
Anaemia	18.1	16.2	17.7	949
May destroy conjugal relation	13.1	12.2	12.9	694
Premature birth	12.9	10.8	12.4	668
Stops education early	5.5	4.7	5.3	286
Harmful for mental health	4.8	5.3	4.9	264

3.10.4 Perceptions of the changing trends in child marriage

51.6% of women in rural areas and 33.7% in urban areas perceived child marriage to be common in their area (Table 11). When asked about the changing nature of child marriage over the years, 72.4% of women in rural areas and 84.3% in urban areas perceived it to have decreased. A higher proportion of women in rural areas perceived child marriage rates to have increased (19.9% in rural areas and 11.8% in urban areas).

Table 11: Perceptions of the changing trends in child marriage

	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of Women
Whether child marriage is perceived to be common in that area				
Yes	51.6	33.7	47.8	2562
No	46.1	64.5	50.0	2682
Do not know	2.4	1.9	2.3	122
Perception of whether child marriage is increasing or decreasing				
Increased	19.9	11.8	18.7	478
Decreased	72.4	84.3	74.2	1901
Remained the same	7.3	3.8	6.7	173
Do not know	0.5	0.1	0.4	11

“Children should be taught about consequences of child marriage at school.”

- FGD with community leaders, Bangladesh



3.11 Knowledge and perceptions: prevention of child marriage

20% of women overall thought that prevention of child marriage was not possible

79.6% of women overall thought there were ways to prevent child marriage. However, 20.4% of women overall thought child marriage could not be prevented (Table 12).

3.11.1 Who can prevent child marriage?

The majority of survey respondents (45.1% overall) believed that parents can prevent child marriage (46.6% in rural areas and 39.8% in urban areas) (Table 12). This was followed by the father of the bride at 27.9% (27.0% in rural areas and 31.1% in urban areas). This corresponds with the finding that the father of the bride is the predominant decision-maker regarding marriage. It is interesting to note that only 1.8% of women overall perceived girls themselves as able to prevent child marriage, which implies that women consider themselves to possess little power to bring change within their family and society.

3.11.2 Ways to prevent child marriage

Consistent with the finding that the majority of women believed parents could prevent child marriage, the most commonly cited means for prevention of child marriage was to increase their awareness (62.9% in rural areas and 70.5% in urban areas). Community members and leaders also appear to have potential to prevent child marriage. Counselling of parents through the Chairman or representatives of Union Parishad was also commonly cited as a prevention method (24.4% in rural areas and 23.3% in urban areas). Counselling through community leaders was also perceived as a means of preventing child marriage by 20.7% of respondents in rural areas and 23.6% in urban areas. This highlights the strong influencing role that community and Union Parishad leaders can play in preventing child marriage.

Focus groups with adolescent boys are consistent with the survey findings. The boys suggested the arrangement of briefing meetings for key members of the community (teachers, Union Parishad members, Imam¹⁶ and Chairmen¹⁷) to raise awareness of issues related to child marriage. They stated that as the Chairman is respected and people listen to him, he can motivate others not to conduct child marriage. This reinforces the importance of recognising key members of the community as agents of change.

The community leaders themselves suggested the formation of village committees. These would monitor the incidence of child marriage in a given locality. The importance of informing parents regarding the consequences of child marriage was recognised, as was increasing awareness within the wider community. Community leaders also suggested the training of Imams, teachers and Kazi¹⁸. Community leaders placed emphasis on education suggesting:

They also emphasised the abolition of the dowry system and the importance of strengthening law enforcement.

¹⁶ Religious leaders.

¹⁷ Chairman of the Union Council, which is the lowest administrative structure at Union level in Bangladesh.

¹⁸ The authorised marriage registrar.

Table 12: Knowledge and perceptions of child marriage prevention

Perceptions on prevention	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
Is there any way to prevent child marriage?				
Yes	78.6	83.2	79.6	4271
No	21.4	16.8	20.4	1096
Means to stop child marriage*				
Increase awareness of parents	62.9	70.5	64.5	3464
Counselling through peer adolescents	10.8	11.7	11.0	589
Increase awareness of members of the community	20.3	17.8	19.8	1063
Counselling through Chairman/representative of Union Parishad	24.4	23.3	24.2	1296
Counselling through community leader	20.7	23.6	21.3	1142
Counselling through religious leader	1.1	0.6	1.0	55
Counselling through school teacher	3.7	4.3	3.8	205
To increase awareness of Kazi	4.9	3.4	4.6	246
Others	0.2	1.0	0.4	21
Who can stop child marriage?				
Father	27.0	31.1	27.9	1193
Mother	1.8	1.3	1.7	71
Parents	46.6	39.8	45.1	1925
Girl herself	1.4	3.2	1.8	78
Family members	4.3	3.6	4.2	177
Community leaders	0.1	0.3	0.2	6
School teachers	0.5	0.9	0.6	24
Local elected leaders (UP members)	5.2	3.8	4.9	209
Marriage registrars	0.7	0.8	0.7	31
Law enforcement	6.1	8.1	6.6	280
Government	6.2	6.9	6.4	272
NGO	0.0	0.1	0.0	2
Others	0.0	0.1	0.1	2

* Multiple responses considered

Adolescent boys were also aware of the importance of marriage registration. They attributed this to the fact that without marriage registration, people are able to remarry without evidence of being wed previously. This is important as marriage registration gives women and girls the right to demand money in divorce. As the following quotes from adolescent boys demonstrate:

“Registration of marriage is very important; it is an official proof ‘dolil’ of marriage. If a woman receives divorce from her husband, she can prove their marriage with this dolil and can demand for ‘mohorana’ [money given to girls/women for security, dependent on religion].”

- FGD with adolescent boys, Bangladesh

“A person would grab [the] hand of a girl and say ‘let’s marry’. After a few days he will leave the girl saying there is no evidence of the marriage, so there would be no question of compensation or ‘talak nama’ [the official divorce paper].”

- FGD with adolescent boys, Bangladesh

Some of the boys also discussed the importance of birth registration:

“In [the] absence of birth registration, the Kazi receives money from the parents and misreports about the actual age of the bride if she is underage.”

- FGD with adolescent boys, Bangladesh

Finally, focus groups with adolescent boys revealed the perception that they themselves could be trained with necessary skills to raise awareness among their peers. They also suggested the formation of boys’ groups or clubs to organise drama, rallies, and group meetings. These events would raise awareness of the consequences of child marriage, legal implications, and prevention. It was also suggested that members of boys’ groups could alert police to any occurrence of child marriage within the community. This is very much in line with Plan’s approach, whereby children’s organisations consisting of both boys and girls have played a vitally effective role in stopping child marriage.

Box 2: The role of children’s organisations

“It was such a great achievement for me; it was like I won a big game.”

- Mutki, who successfully prevented her own marriage.

During the research, interviews were conducted with two girls named Joiya and Mutki, who successfully prevented their own marriages at a young age.¹⁹ The girls were aged 16 and 17 at the time their marriages were arranged by their families. In one case the groom’s family proposed the marriage, and in another the girl’s family decided on a groom they believed to be suitable.

Both girls were students and were also involved with organisations including LAMB hospital and Plan International Bangladesh.²⁰ Joiya was also a member of a local drama club. Activities arranged by the organisations, which the girls regularly engaged with, covered issues including the consequences of child marriage and the importance of birth registration, hygiene, and health care. During the group meetings the girls were taught about their right not to marry before the legal age.

As a result of their involvement with organisations, the girls became aware of the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh and were able to prevent their arranged marriages. They did so by convincing their extended family members, including their aunts and brothers-in-law, to postpone the marriage. The girls also sought assistance from programme staff to counsel their parents. The girls’ extended family members and the programme staff approached the parents and discussed the legal implications of child marriage with them. These combined efforts by family members and programme staff motivated the girls’ parents to postpone the marriages.

Joiya and Mutki went on to work as peer educators to raise the awareness of other adolescent girls in their locality about the consequences of child marriage, the importance of birth registration, and their rights. As Joiya informed, “As I took part regularly in the group meetings and other organisational activities, I gained courage to talk in front of a gathering.”

The girls’ future aspirations are educational and financial. When asked about her life plan, Mutki stated she would continue higher secondary study and complete a Master’s degree. She then wanted to be employed in a “high position”.

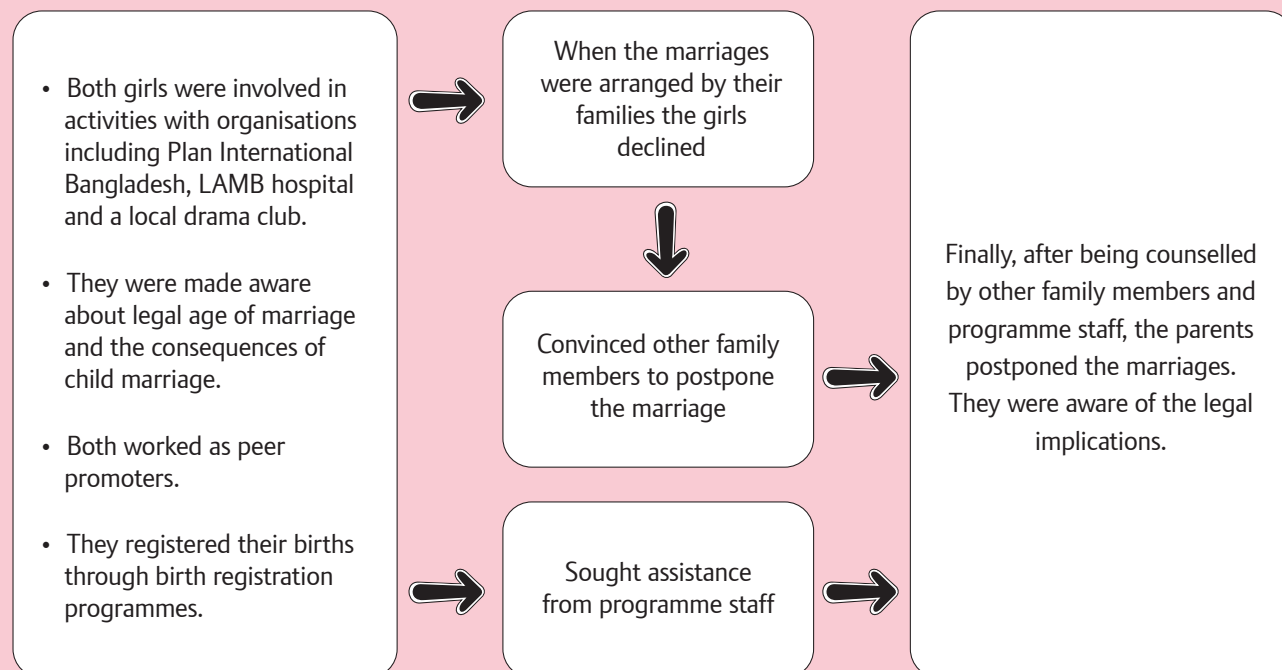
Joiya also expressed similar views in aiming to complete higher education. She said, “I am more confident now in my life, I think I took the right decision of not marrying at this age.”

¹⁹ Pseudonyms have been used for confidentiality purposes.

²⁰ LAMB is located in north-west Bangladesh and works in health and development.

The way in which Joiya and Mutki prevented their marriages is also demonstrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: An example of successful child marriage prevention



3.11.3 Awareness of organisations and birth registration programme

The survey revealed low awareness of child marriage prevention organisations within Bangladesh. Only 3.3% of women overall demonstrated awareness (Table 13). Of women who were aware of organisations, these included Concerned Women for Family Development and Plan International Bangladesh.

Positively however, 91.9% of women were aware of the government’s birth registration programme.

Table 13: Knowledge and perceptions of child marriage prevention organisations and birth registration programme

Perceptions on prevention	Rural %	Urban %	Overall Total %	Number of women
Awareness of child marriage prevention organisations				
Yes	3.9	1.3	3.3	178
No	96.1	98.7	96.7	5188
Knowledge about the birth registration programme				
Yes	91.0	95.2	91.9	4932
No	9.0	4.8	8.1	434

Birth registration has played a crucial role in reducing child marriage in Plan International Bangladesh’s working areas, especially working with government to expedite a shift to online birth registration in its working areas so that certificates can no longer be falsified to show an underage girl as being above 18.



Education is strongly associated with child marriage.

86% of women with no education were married before 18 years of age, compared to 26% of women who had completed secondary or higher education.

04 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

This report has presented findings from a national survey commissioned by Plan International Bangladesh to provide policy makers and practitioners with an understanding of the present situation of child marriage in Bangladesh, and the causes and consequences of child marriage within the country. The key findings to emerge from the survey are:

- ▶ **The prevalence of child marriage is still high in Bangladesh. 64% of all women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18.**
- ▶ There are lower rates of child marriage among younger women compared to older women, suggesting that child marriage rates are decreasing.
- ▶ **There is a positive correlation between location (urban/rural) and child marriage. The rate of child marriage among all women aged 20–24 years was 54% in urban areas, compared with 71% in rural areas.**
- ▶ Education is strongly associated with child marriage. 86% of women with no education were married before 18 years of age, compared to 26% of women who had completed secondary or higher education.
- ▶ **It is most common for the father of the bride to make decisions regarding the marriage of their daughters.**
- ▶ There is a correlation between location and awareness of legal age limits. 45% of women in rural areas and 55% of women in urban areas were aware of the legal age of marriage.
- ▶ **Employment at time of marriage is associated with lower rates of child marriage (57% employed versus 70% unemployed at time of marriage).**



“Tell everybody what is happening to our girls all over the world. If everybody knows then we can make a change.”

Tamanna is 13 years old. She is a member of Plan’s Children’s Group in northern Dhaka, Bangladesh raising awareness of the impact of early and forced marriage on girls.

This section makes key recommendations for action based on findings from the national survey on child marriage in Bangladesh.

1. Enforce legal processes to stop child marriage

It is important for the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs and the Ministry of Justice to enforce legal processes to stop child marriage and to involve the community in this process. A mechanism for doing so is sensitising local Union Parishad members and Chairmen on child marriage issues. This will enable them to assist law enforcement agencies in preventing child marriage.

Plan recognises that while legislation is a critically important starting point, by itself it is not sufficient to prevent and eliminate the prevalence of child marriage. Any legislative reform, in order to be effective, must be accompanied by a series of other measures, including effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

2. Online birth registration should continue to be driven across the country

It is crucial to ensure that the online birth registration system is driven across the country by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives so that girls’ correct ages will be known and the falsification of ages will be prevented. This will enable legal steps to be taken by law enforcement agencies to stop child marriage.

3. Improve girls’ safety in communities, including through community-based child protection mechanisms

It is important to increase the wider protection of girls within communities. Effective national child protection systems and community-based child protection mechanisms are vital to helping to prevent and respond to child marriage. The enforcement of anti-harassment laws must be strengthened so that girls are at less risk of sexual harassment. This harassment often causes parents/guardians to marry girls early due to the fear of attacks on girls for rejecting male advances.

Community-based child protection mechanisms should be strengthened and increased. This should be embedded in the union level Standing Committee for Women and Children. Plan’s work with Child Protection Groups consisting of influential members of the community has led to appropriate prevention measures in a timely manner.

4. Increase the awareness of families and communities , especially fathers

The survey has shown that parents and fathers in particular, are the prime decision makers for marriage. There needs to be concerted effort to highlight the negative consequences of child marriage to fathers themselves, including explanation of the health implications for their daughters and grandchildren. Extended family members may also influence decision-making processes. Therefore, interventions should involve all members of the wider community.

Regular advocacy workshops should be organised for key members of the community and society. Within these workshops the detrimental consequences of child marriage and methods for prevention should be discussed.

5. Foster children's agency in preventing child marriage

Many girls are denied the choice of whether, when and who to marry as these decisions are often made by parents, guardians, families and communities.

Children themselves should be engaged to stop child marriage in their communities. They should be made aware of their rights and supported to take action through children's organisations to raise awareness on the detrimental effects of child marriage to families and local leaders, reporting cases when necessary.

It is important to create an enabling environment for girls in order for their voices to be heard with regards to their entitlements and rights, through providing leadership positions for them in children's groups so that they grow their confidence to resist child marriage, hand in hand with awareness raising for adults. This will enable girls to overcome entrenched gender norms that perceive women and girls to be "submissive" in family and society, to raise their voices effectively for their own benefits and rights, and to take part in decisions concerning their own marriages.

6. Involve men and boys as key agents to stop child marriage

The role of men and boys in challenging child marriage and raising awareness among their families, peers and communities of the negative effects of child marriage is a vital part of efforts to eliminate the practice. Boys' peer groups can be established to increase awareness of the issues surrounding child marriage and they can also act as a cadre group to prevent the harassment of girls.

7. Invest in girls' education

The survey highlights that child marriage results in girls dropping out of school. Education, which is relevant to the needs, rights and aspirations of girls, is a critical factor in empowering girls and enabling them to acquire the skills, knowledge and capacity to be full and active members of their families, communities and society. It is therefore highly important to emphasise the importance of education to parents and communities, so that marriage is delayed and girls are able to make free and independent decisions about whether, when and whom to marry and can protect their sexual and reproductive health.

8. Invest in adolescent and sexual reproductive health

The key consequence of child marriage was stated as grave health consequences, particularly due to early child bearing. All adolescents must have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive sexual and reproductive health information and services. Such services – including psychosocial support as part of integrated health services for adolescents – should be accessible to all adolescents and youth and provided in youth-friendly ways. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) has included sexual reproductive health (SRH) and child marriage in one chapter of the secondary school curriculum textbook. However, school teachers need to be sensitised and trained to talk about the issue for this to have any effect. Media and theatre for development can also play a role so that parents and other stakeholders (local elites, religious leaders, community based organisations) recognise the importance of ASRH rights and its link to child marriage.

Specific measures are needed to ensure that both married and unmarried adolescents are supported and enabled to access vital sexual and reproductive health services including contraception, family planning, emergency obstetric care and quality ante-natal and post-natal care. Service providers of the NGO clinics in the urban areas and Family Welfare Centres (FWCs) in the rural areas should provide adolescent friendly health services (AFHS) by creating an adolescent corner in facilities. Comprehensive training on adolescent friendly health services should be provided to all levels of staff in health facilities following the WHO guideline. This will ensure accessibility, acceptability and quality services for adolescents. Direct service providers should receive counselling training on how to deal with adolescents in their work environment.

The Government has to ensure availability of contraceptives in the health centres to ensure that both married and unmarried adolescents are supported and enabled to access vital sexual and reproductive health services including contraception, family planning, emergency obstetric care and quality ante-natal and post-natal care at all times, including during disasters.

R E F E R E N C E S

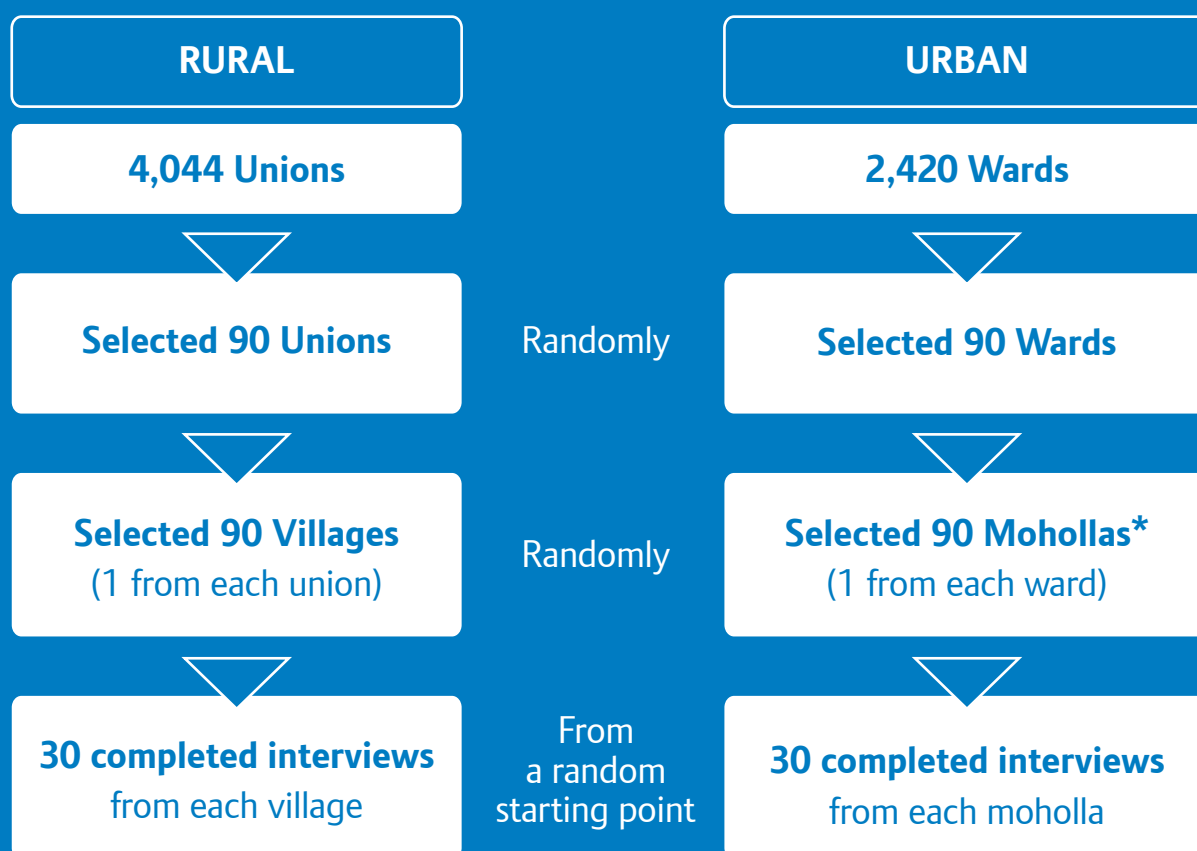
- Åbo Akademi University, Institute for Human Rights, and Plan Finland Stealing Innocence: Child Marriage and gender inequality in Pakistan
- Barkat, A. and Majid, M. Adolescent Reproductive Health in Bangladesh: Status, Policies, Programs, and Issues. [Online] Washington, D.C: Futures Group International. Available at: http://www.policyproject.com/pubs/countryreports/ARH_Bangladesh.pdf [accessed 21 March 2013]
- Brown, G. 2012. Out of wedlock, into school: combating child marriage through education. A review by Gordon Brown. London: The Office of Gordon and Sarah Brown.
- Feld, K. and Hayes, W. 2009. Growing up early: The Female Experience in Bangladesh. [Online] Available at: http://www.d3systems.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/WIMC_Bangladesh_Paper_v12_withdate.pdf [accessed 21 March 2013]
- Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. 2010. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929. [Online] Available at: http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/sections_detail.php?id=149§ions_id=4952 [accessed 21 March 2013]
- Gyimah, S.O. 2009. Cohort Differences in Women's Educational Attainment and the Transition to First Marriage in Ghana. Population Research and Policy Review 28(4): 455-471
- IPPF, UNFPA, The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, 2006. Ending child marriage. A guide for global policy action.
- National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), Mitra and Associates, and Macro International. 2009. Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2007. Dhaka, Bangladesh and Calverton, Maryland, USA: National Institute of Population Research and Training, Mitra and Associates, and Macro International.
- Parveen, S. and Sarkar, N.N. 2013. Report on child marriage free unions. Plan International Bangladesh. [Internal Document.]
- Plan International 2013. A girl's right to say no to marriage: Working to end child marriage and keep girls in school, Woking: Plan International
- UNICEF. 2005. Child marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice. A Statistical Exploration 2005. New York: UNICEF
- UNICEF. No date. Child marriage in South Asia: A Discussion Paper. [Online] Available at: [http://www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage\(lastversion\).doc](http://www.unicef.org/rosa/earlymarriage(lastversion).doc) [accessed 22nd March 2013]
- UNICEF, 2011 State of the World's Children, Realizing the Rights of Adolescents
- UNICEF. 2013. Bangladesh. The Children. Child marriage. http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/children_4866.htm [accessed 21 March 2013]
- UNFPA. 2012. Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage. New York: UNFPA
- World Bank. 2011. Bangladesh: Priorities for Agriculture and Rural Development. World Bank.

APPENDIX A: NATIONAL SURVEY SAMPLING FRAME

The text and figure below outline the sampling frame used for data collection.

In rural areas, 90 unions were randomly selected out of a total 4,044. From these selected unions, 90 villages were selected randomly (one village per union). 30 interviews were conducted in each village.

In urban areas, 90 wards were randomly selected from a total of 2,420. In each of the 90 wards, one moholla (cluster of households in urban areas, which usually follows road boundaries) was randomly selected. In each moholla, 30 interviews were completed.



*Moholla can be roughly translated as a small neighborhood

ISBN 978-9-8433769-4-7



9 789843 376947