



## Distance Education for Social Development in Bangladesh

Farida Easmin SHELLEY, & Nahid FERDOUSI  
Bangladesh Open University, Bangladesh  
[arnab965@yahoo.com](mailto:arnab965@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT :

In social development, marriage is a key event and milestone in the lives of every individual. Marriage for women before the age of 18 is common in rural Bangladesh. It is associated with a number of poor social and physical outcomes for the young woman and her children. In the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) State of the World's Children 2009 report, findings show that early marriage is pervasive in Bangladesh, with 64 percent of girls married before aged 18, as IRIN News reports. Early pregnancy often results from early marriage : about one-third of girls aged 15 to 19 in Bangladesh are currently either mothers or pregnant. There are many reasons for an early marriage, but the most vital reasons among them are poverty, superstition or local custom, and lack of awareness. Although early marriage is legally prohibited, occurrences of early marriage are still happening in most rural areas of the country. In Bangladesh, under the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 the age for the bride is set at 18. Along with this act, early marriage is punishable by law. Bangladesh also acceded to the UN Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages on 5 October 1998. These laws, however, have had little impact on the incidence of early marriage here. To help prevent early marriage, a wide range of individuals and organizations, from community leaders to international bodies, are active engaged in education for social development. We need to create better awareness among the people, particularly the poor. Unfortunately, these aspects have long been ignored in our traditional school education system. The present study reports on the effectiveness of creating awareness on the socio-legal impact of early marriage in Bangladesh through the distance education mode.

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries with 142 million people in its 1,48,393 sq km areas. Early marriage is one of the important demographic determinates of women in Bangladesh. One of the major causes of higher population growth is high fertility rate – which are affected by age at marriage, first child birth, spacing between child birth(s), infant and child mortality, social and economic condition. However, information on age at first marriage is lacking (Nasreen, 2001) in Bangladesh which has a long tradition of early and of universal marriage for females

(Afroza et al, 1999). Where as, early marriage for boys and girls has serious physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional impacts. It also cutting off educational opportunity and hampers personal growth. According to the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 the age for the girl in Bangladesh is set at 18. In reality, still remain below the legal minimum age of 18 years. Although the government of Bangladesh has raised the legal age to 18 years for females, and to 21 years for males; there are reports of rural girls that agree to arranged marriage before their age of 12 to 15 (Mizanur, 1999). According to a report in 1975, 99.8 % of Bangladeshi women and

99.7% men did not marry below the age of 10 years (Chowdhur et al, 1980). Sometimes early marriage is prohibited by civil laws, but early marriage is widely condoned by religious laws & practice, and these laws are too often not enforced, since the women involved often lack any registered birth certificate (UNESCO RECHPEC, undated).

Evidence from several studies, worldwide, including few in Bangladesh demonstrated the adverse consequences of early marriage. In spite of the effort both from the Govt. and several NGOs, early marriage still prevails in the country at a much higher rate than in other countries. In order to reduce (if not possible to stop it at this moment) early marriage in our country, it is mandatory that our communities possess basic education, sufficiently information and available approaches to be aware on this issue of reducing early marriage from our societies. It is important that knowledge of our communities, particularly among less educated, low-socio economic and lower class communities like sweepers, slum dwellers, floating families, etc are properly assessed who are more vulnerable and believe in and practice early marriage most commonly. The main aim of this article is to create awareness among less educated group on socio-legal impact of early marriage through distance mode.

## 2. METHODS :

At Hazaribagh, behind the B.D.R. head quarter and Southern part of the Rayerbazar tanneries of Dhaka, there is a sweeper community known as the Gonoktuli Municipal (sweeper) Colony. Overcrowding is a great problem for them, which causes health, education and accommodation problems in the sweeper colony. Due to illiteracy, lack of education and overcrowding, early marriage has become dominant in the sweeper community.

Gonaktoli sweeper colony is very big one but my study population is a portion of the colony. These portion contain 145 house hold. These 145 households of that area are our study population. However, 104 of total

145 households were found to collect information from the parents. All the parents of this portion of colony who are available included in the study purposively. From every household, we took only-one parents (father or mother). A questionnaire was prepared as a tool for this study and was finalized after pre- testing. The questionnaire was prepared according to objective of the study. A self-administered multiple-choice questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was simple and easy to understand with the Bengali version. At first, permission of the local leader of the colony was taken. Before data collection a self-introductory session was arranged to explain the purpose of data collection of the research to the respondents. So, that they could understand the aims and objectives of the study and the meaning of the questions that they could respond accordingly. This phase was introduced as pre-intervention phase. Data was collected by the researcher herself. The respondent's answer to the questions and the interviewer filled up the questionnaires.

Intervention Approach: After baseline survey on analysis of the base line data, areas where educational intervention was needed were found out. Educational program was developed. Then lesson plan, flip chart and posters were prepared. The investigator conducted the educational session by group approach. For intervention the researchers visited all the households (selected) and informed regarding intervention program on knowledge on adverse effect of early marriage. The entire respondents were requested to be present at selected place to participate in the group education. Using same questionnaire did post intervention evaluation. The investigator went house to house of the respondents for post intervention evaluation. The evaluation was done through person-to-person interviews.

## 3. RESULTS :

Figure 1 below shows that most of the respondents (n=82, 78.8%) had either no formal schooling or were illiterate.

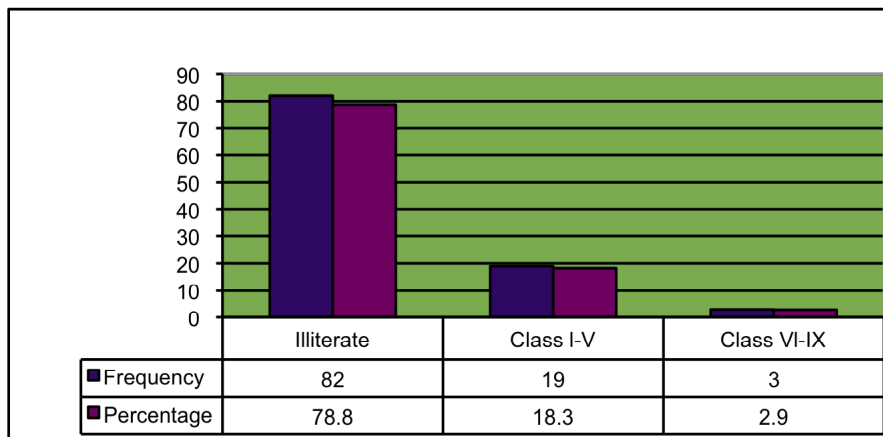


Figure 1 : Distribution of respondents by their educational level

Table 1 : Knowledge of Respondent on the Govt. Recommended Age of Boys for Marrying - Before & After Intervention

Knowledge about age of marriage among boys	Before intervention (N=104)		After intervention (N=104)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Correct	11	10.5	85	81.7
Incorrect	43	41.3	19	18.3
No Response	50	48	00	00
Total	104	100	104	100

\*Total percentage exceeds 100 due to multiple responses.

Table 2 : Knowledge of Respondent on the Govt. Recommended Age of Girls for Marrying - Before & After Intervention

Knowledge about age of marriage among girls	Before intervention (N=104)		After intervention (N=104)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Correct	34	32.7	103	99
Incorrect	22	21.1	01	0.9
No Response	48	46	00	00
Total	104	100	104	100

\*Total percentage exceeds 100 due to multiple responses.

Table 1 shows before intervention only 11 (10.5%) correctly answered about age of marriage but after intervention this increased to 85 (81.7%), and Table 2 shows before intervention only 34 (32.7%) correctly answered about age of marriage but after intervention this was increased to 103 (99%).

Only very few studies have been conducted on early marriage in Bangladesh. However

a study carried out in Dhaka among adolescent girls to know their knowledge on early marriage showed that 44.6% of them did not have correct knowledge on early marriage and its consequences which raised up to 90.8% after intervention. 19 Moreover, in a study in rural Lalmonirhat, It was found that 94.5% parents had inadequate knowledge on the consequences of early marriage (Salam M. A. et al 1995).

#### 4. DISCUSSION :

##### 4.1 The Socio-Legal Impact of Early Marriage :

Early marriage has a serious adverse effect on health. Several studies have documented poorer outcomes for children born to adolescent mothers compared to older mothers. One hospital-based study found a perinatal mortality rate that was twice as high among children of adolescent mothers compared to children whose mothers were older than age 19 (40.5 versus 18 per 1000 births) (Adhikari & Amatya, 1996). Evidence suggests that children of older adolescents (aged 17-19) fare better than those born to younger adolescents (aged 16 or younger), when outcomes such as low birth weight and pre-term birth are compared (Dali & Pradhan, 1992).

Early marriage can be a violation of children's basic right to a childhood, to an education, to good health and to make decisions about their own lives. The most common result of the early marriage is the withdrawal of girl from formal education. Many husband of the developing countries expect that their wives should not attend formal education. But allow attending in religious, household and child care duties. As such early married women are unable to go against their husband wishes and many families refuse to invest their limited income for female education. Evidence shows that less educated mother cannot provide good education for their children. Their daughters especially are likely to drop out, married at younger age and begin the cycle again. Hence, Early marriage is a significant barrier for proper education, which increases the poverty cycle for the country.

For young women just beginning their married lives, the risks of early child bearing, low education, lower income, more divorce or separation, live in poverty, extra to other social consequences (Population Report).

There are other problems associated with early marriage having negative impact on the society, as a whole<sup>16</sup>. Girls who marry before the age of 18 years have more children and also suffer from various

maternal and gynecological problems (Salam et al, 1995). Early marriage also significantly contributes to higher marital dissolution.

In general, the incidence of early marriage, usually considered as that which takes place before both partners are at least eighteen years of age, has risen in recent years. In Bangladesh the average age for marriage is 18 for females and 21 for males. Still, it is reported that a significant number of females are married when they are under 15. However, those figures reflect the national average. With adolescence defined as ages 10 to 15, the mean age for marriage during adolescence in Bangladesh is 12.4 for girls and 13.4 for boys. It is also significant to note that early marriage for girls is about 11 times higher than for boys. Early childbearing follows early marriage in Bangladesh. In 1996-1997, 36% of all teenage women (age 13-19) were either pregnant or already had a child.

Based on the above literature it thus becomes obvious that it is extremely important that knowledge of our communities, particularly among less educated, low-socioeconomic and lower class communities like sweepers, slum dwellers, floating families, etc. are properly assessed, since they are more vulnerable to, and believe in and practice, early marriage. Thus, the findings of this study might help the relevant authorities, to design strategies and take up through distance mode towards reducing, with the aim of banning early marriage from Bangladesh.

##### 4.2 Preventive Laws on Early Marriage :

###### 1.5.1 National Legal Framework

###### i. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929

In Bangladesh, the *Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929* is the main law for control the early marriage. According to the Act the minimum legal age at marriage is 18 years for females. Along with this Act early marriage is punishable by law. Section 3 stated about punishment for male adult below twenty-one years of age marrying a child. This section stated that

“whoever, being a male above eighteen years of age and below twenty-one, contracts a child marriage shall be

punishable with simple imprisonment which may extend to fifteen days, or with fine which may extend to one thousand rupees, or with both.”

Moreover, section 5 of the said *Act* stipulated about punishment for solemnising a child marriage. According to this section

“whoever performs, conducts or directs any child marriage shall be punishable with simple imprisonment which may extend to three months and shall also be liable to fine, unless he proves that he had reason to believe that the marriage was not a child marriage.”

Section 6 mentioned the following punishment for parent or guardian concerned in a child marriage:

“(1) Where a minor contracts a child marriage, any person having charge of the minor, whether as parent or guardian or in any other capacity, lawful or unlawful, who does any act to promote the marriage or permits it to be solemnised, or negligently fails to prevent it from being solemnised, shall be punishable with simple imprisonment which may extend to three months and shall also be liable to fine. Provided that no woman shall be punishable with imprisonment.

(2) For the purposes of this section, it shall be presumed, unless and until the contrary is proved, that where a minor has contracted a child marriage, the person having charge of such minor has negligently failed to prevent the marriage from being solemnised.”

Although early marriage is prohibited legally, but occurrences of early marriage are still happening in rural areas of the country. There are laws against it in the country but they are not executed properly.

ii. The Birth and Death Registration Act, 2004

The situation of early marriage is increased by the fact that most births go unregistered. The Law and Local Government Ministry is putting the representation of the *Birth and Death Registration Act, 2004* in force since 2006. The Act requires birth certificate as proof of age for a number of essential services such as marriage registration, obtaining a passport, and enrollment in school.

iii. The Children Act, 1974

Article 34 of the *Children Act, 1974* specifically stipulates the penalty to be imposed for cruelty to children. According to section 34 of the said *Act*

“If any person over the age of sixteen years, who has the custody, charge or care of any child assaults, ill-treats, neglects, abandons or exposes such child or causes such child to be assaulted, ill-treated, neglected, abandoned or exposed in a manner likely to cause such child unnecessary suffering or injury to his health, including loss of sight or hearing or injury to limb or organ of the body and any mental derangement, such person shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine which may extend to Taka one thousand or with both.”

1.5.2 International Instruments

The right to free and full consent to marriage was recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and many subsequent human rights instruments. A number of human rights instruments lay down norms to be applied to marriage, covering issues of age, consent, equality within marriage, and the personal and property rights of women. The key instruments and articles are as follows:

i. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948

Article 16 of the (*UDHR*) 1948 states:

“(1) Men and women of full age ... have the right to marry and found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending parties.”

Similar provisions are included in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

ii. The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 1964

Articles 1, 2, and 3 of the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 1964 state:

“(1) No marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties, such consent to be expressed by them in person ... as prescribed by law.

(2) States Parties to the present Convention shall ... specify a minimum age for marriage (“not less than 15 years” according to the nonbinding recommendation accompanying this Convention). No marriage shall be legally

entered into by any person under this age, except where a competent authority has granted a dispensation as to age, for serious reasons, in the interests of the intending spouses ...

(3) All marriages shall be registered ... by the competent authority.”

iii. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979

Article 16.1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979 prescribes equally for men and women :

“(a) The same right to enter into marriage;

(b) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent; ...

Article 16.2 states: The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage.”

iv. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990

Article XXI of the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990* states:

“Child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be eighteen years.”

v. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989* has been ratified by all countries in the world. Virtually every provision of the CRC is of some relevance to the issue of early marriage. Among the most pertinent, however, are the following:

Article 1: A child means every human

being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.

Article 2: Freedom from discrimination on any grounds, including sex, religion, ethnic or social origin, birth or other status.

Article 3: In all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Article 6: Maximum support for survival and development.

Article 12: The right to express his or her views freely in all matters affecting the child, in accordance with age and maturity.

Article 19: The right to protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents, guardian, or any other person.

Article 24: The right to health, and to access to health services; and to be protected from harmful traditional practices.

Articles 28 and 29: The right to education on the basis of equal opportunity.

Article 34: The right to protection from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

Article 35: The right to protection from abduction, sale or trafficking.

Article 36: The right to protection from all forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspect of the child’s welfare.

#### 4.3 Awareness about Impact of Early Marriage through Distance Mode:

Marriage age and impact of early marriage through distance mode can play a vital role to disseminate the knowledge in the grassroots level. Distance education is a method of education in which the learner is physically separated from the teacher and the institution sponsoring the instruction. Distance education has served as an alternative method for delivering academic course & non-formal courses to various categories of people who are unable to attend traditional campus-based classes. Distance education offers students considerable benefits, including increased access to learning, lifelong learning opportunities, and convenience of time and place. Distance education may be essential

for learners who are truly place-bound because of factors such as employment, child-care demands, disability, or remoteness of the location where they live.

The traditional education system cannot impart the health education to large number of pregnant and lactating mothers who have been already dropped from education in almost all the developing countries. Moreover, when rate of education is much lower in developing countries, the traditional educational institutions are not at all sufficient to create the health awareness to their poor & illiterate people. Bangladesh Open University conducted a need survey to determine the demand for health related program. It was revealed in the need survey that there was greater demand of health related program. The results from the survey is given in Table 3 below.

The survey shows that the demand for Health, Nutrition and population (Non Formal) is 88.38 which is the highest. For such greater demand Bangladesh Open University offers non-formal health program to create awareness and to impart knowledge about legal rights and health education especially importance of human rights, personal rights, basic knowledge about primary health care, knowledge about nutritious food, maternal and child health care. These programs are telecast and simultaneously broadcast in radio. Non-formal legal and health education play avital role to the awareness of age of marriage. Bangladesh Open University a pioneer of distance education of about 6 lakh students introduced formal and non-formal health education program to impart knowledge about health, law, basic science, agriculture, food, nutrition, and other branches of knowledge for human development. Also other developing countries could introduce health programs

with rights of health especially maternal and child health education to control the population growth and to improve the health condition of the people which will enhance their productive capacity. Printed and written materials have long been used in distance education. A full package mostly written on basic primary health care and child health education is important to launch the formal program (Haque & Rumble 1997). The text should be written in a very easy language with modular form. Radio, Television, Telephone, Audio-Video conferencing, Computer etc. can be used for health program especially highlighting the consequences of early marraige. Introduction of CD-ROM for legal and health education can summarize and concentrate thousands of topics. In addition we can use electronic media like teleconferencing, video conferencing, CD-ROM projection and online Internet system for impact of early marriage. Especially radio and TV on socio-legal impact and awareness have advantages over large audience and targeted people. Formal and non-formal personal rights and health education may produce health trainees on various issues of reproductive health. It is also essential to provide health education and to train the field health worker like health assistant, health visitor, health inspector, sanitary inspector, midwives to increase the effectiveness of health program. Certificate in Primary Health Care Program can upgrade the knowledge of the health trainer and of the mass people of the country in general regarding health awareness. By launching formal program a large number of health personnel can be produced. It will also create efficient and skill manpower in the grass root level. Besides the traditional education system on female education, more emphasis should be

Table 3 : Assessment reports on the demand offering health-related program by the BOU

Name of the Program	Positive opinion (%)
Certificate in Health and Family Planning	47.37
Bachelor in Education	42.56
Diploma in Agriculture	25.87
B.Sc. in Nursing Degree	21.50
Health, Nutrition and population (Non Formal)	88.38

given through distance mode of education. The existing conventional legal and health education system in developing countries can not provide health education to the large segment of population, particularly for the poor and the deprived people. But distance mode of health education is less expensive and it can reach to the people more easily than traditional educational system. Thus distance education may produce thousands of health assistant and trainers who can create awareness in age of marriage to improve the overall condition of child and mother.

##### 5. CONCLUSION :

In Bangladesh, law as well as social awareness should be enforced to discourage early marriage. One difficulty in application of the age of consent law is that in rural Bangladesh most marriages are unregistered. The situation is intensified by the fact that birth registration is so irregular that age at marriage may not be known. Since it is essential to create awareness among the people by informing and education them regarding the legal age of marriage to deal with the situation. The study provided some useful information on the issue of early marriage among one of the vulnerable communities of Bangladesh. This type education to ensure basic health is not possible through conventional education system for its many limitations. Open and distance learning for health program should be given greater emphasis for the social, cultural, economic and overall development of any country. All modern technology should be used to focus on the consequences of early marriage. Moreover, this study highlighted certain positive tips for country's economic and social benefit,

particularly through creating positive attitudes to enhancing income generating programmes and thus creating employment opportunity and overall development, which will ultimately reduce the health hazards and help to curtail our child maternal morbidity and mortality rates.

##### REFERENCES :

- Adhikari, R.K. (undated). *Early marriage and child bearing: risk and consequences*.
- Afroza, et al (1999). Obstetric related residual morbidities among the women in Bangladesh. *JOPSOM*, 22-29.
- Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. *Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh 2000*.
- Bangladesh Population Data Sheet 1988*.
- Chowdhury, R., et al (1980). Female Status in Bangladesh. *Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies*, 81-90.
- Haque, A., & Rumble, G. (1997). The Bangladesh Open University : Mission and promise. *Open Learning*, 12 (2), 12-28.
- Karim R.A. (2000). *Health education intervention on early marriage for adolescent girls in secondary school*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Department of MP & HE. NIPSOM, 1-63.
- Mizanur M., et al (1999). Female adolescent marriage among the slum dwellers of Dhaka City. *JOPSOM*, 6-10.
- Nasreen, et al (2001). Knowledge of adolescent school girls on some reproductive health issues. *JOPSOM*, 1-9
- Salam, M.A., et al (1995). Parents' Knowledge, Attitude and Practice Regarding Early Marriage of Their Daughters in a selected Rural Community of Bangladesh. *JOPSOM* : 14 (1&2): 10-13.
- Social and economic consequences of early childbearing. *Population Reports*, Series J, Number 41. Retrieved July 10, 2010, from [http://www.k4health.org/pr/j41/j41chap2\\_5.shtml](http://www.k4health.org/pr/j41/j41chap2_5.shtml)
- UNESCO RECHPEC (undated). Early marriage and early childbearing. *Legislation Review. Package of laws and legislations series 3*.

Dr Farida Easmin SHELLEY is in the School of Science and Technology, email: [arnab965@yahoo.com](mailto:arnab965@yahoo.com), and Dr Nahid FERDOUSI is in the School of Social Sciences, Humanities & Languages, email: [nahid329@yahoo.com](mailto:nahid329@yahoo.com), at Bangladesh Open University , Dhaka, Bangladesh.

For copyright / reproducing permission details, email : [Office@AsianJDE.org](mailto:Office@AsianJDE.org)