

Watch Report

No. 35

Research and Evaluation Division of BRAC, Bangladesh

April 1998

Early Marriage, Bride Price and the Practice of Dowry in Bangladesh Villages

Abstract: This study estimates the incidence and correlates of early marriage and the practice of dowry in rural Bangladesh. Data for this research came from *Watch*, a surveillance system of BRAC covering 70 villages in 10 regions of the country. The incidence of early marriage was reported 60.3% and the dowry practice was 50.1% in 1996. Findings reveal that such socioeconomic factors as the education of spouses, amount of land owned, socioeconomic status and media exposure has reduced the incidence of early marriage and practice of dowry while increased the amount of bride prices. Hindus were more likely to practice dowry than Muslims. The participation in micro-credit programme has not played any significant role in reducing early marriage and dowry practices in rural Bangladesh.

Introduction

The role of development program on women's empowerment and the change of reproductive behavior received adequate attention in development discourse. However, nuptial issues such as early marriage, practice of dowry, etc. and their relevance with development efforts have largely been ignored. This report presents the incidence and the socioeconomic determinants of early marriages and the practice of dowry in Bangladesh villages. Also, an assessment of the average amount of *mehr* and its socioeconomic variations are also presented.

Methodology

BRAC has a nationally representative intensive monitoring system, known as *Watch*, in 70 villages located in ten districts of Bangladesh. The *Watch* documents the changes in social life of the community as a result of development programs in such areas as credit-based income generating activities, essential health care for the poor, and legal and social awareness for women.

Data were extracted from the marriage file of 1995 where all event of marriage in the study villages were recorded. All other relevant demographic and socioeconomic information were collected by interviewing the family members of those households. Information of a total of 862 marriages were collected and analyzed in this report.

Findings

The incidence of early marriage (60.3%) and dowry practice (50.1%) were quite high in rural Bangladesh (Table 1). The mean amount of *mehr* (bride price) paid or promised to pay was 28,123 taka. Early marriage and the practice of dowry during marriage

had negative associations with the education of bridegroom.

Table 1. Role of education on age at marriage, practice of dowry and the mean amount of bride price in taka

Education of spouses	Early marriage	Practice of dowry	Bride price
All	60.3	50.1	28123
<i>Bridegroom</i>			
No school	66.7	75.9	20747
I - V	59.0	68.1	23083
VI +	48.9	52.1	46256
<i>Bride</i>			
No school	60.5	61.8	17005
I - V	69.5	48.8	21371
VI +	50.7	41.0	45320

Although the dowry practice reduced with the years of schooling of the bride also, the prevalence of early marriage remained very high unless the girls received higher education. The amount of bride price paid (or promised to pay), however, increased with the education of both the bride and bridegroom probably because the capacity to pay more was much higher among the educated families.

Table 2. Role of socioeconomic factors on age at marriage, practice of dowry and the mean amount of bride price in taka

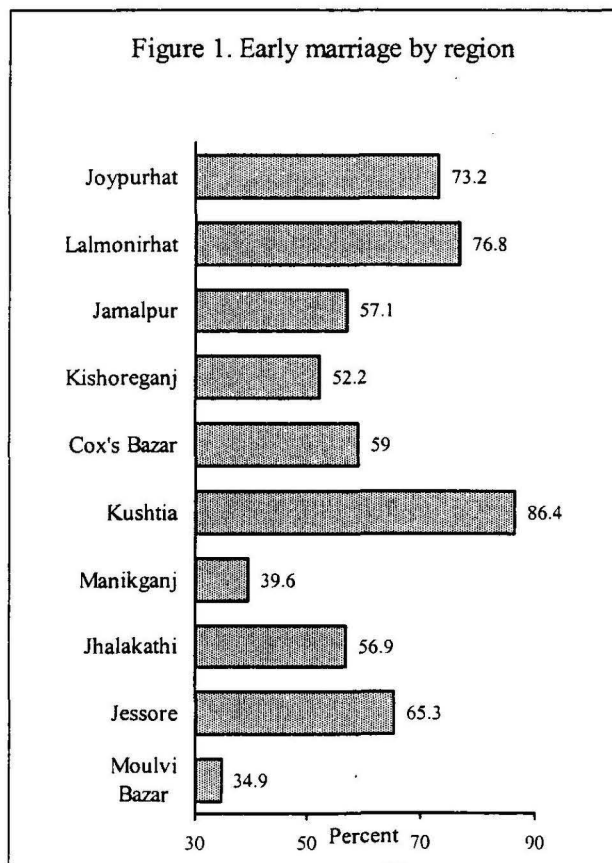
Socioeconomic factors	Early marriage	Practice of dowry	Bride price
<i>Land</i>			
Landless	65.3	63.5	19722
1 - 199 dec	60.2	41.9	27974
200 +	51.3	36.6	48384
<i>Religion</i>			
Muslim	62.9	45.2	32495
Hindu	52.0	66.6	---
<i>Media exposure</i>			
Not exposed	61.8	53.8	24101
Exposed	56.5	40.5	38756

This is reflected in Table 2. While both the incidence of early marriage and the practice of dowry reduced

with the ownership of land, the bride price continued to rise with land ownership. The incidence of early marriage was much higher among the Muslims than Hindus while the practice of dowry was significantly higher among the Hindus than the Muslim families. The Hindus, however, do not practice paying or receiving bride price. The exposure to mass media played a significant role in reducing both the incidence of early marriage and the practice of dowry. The promise of paying a higher bride price was higher among better-exposed families indicating that media played little attention to the message to reduce bride price in marriages in Bangladesh.

The incidence of early marriages varied across the region (Figure 1). While the causes of such wide variation were not known, it is assumed that poverty and insecurity, particularly among the adolescent girls might have played an important role.

Figure 1. Early marriage by region



The credit-based development program played contributed significantly ($p < 0.01$) in reducing both the incidence of early marriage and dowry practice although the difference was not very significant (Table 3). Regarding the bride price, no consistent pattern had emerged as a result of the participation in development program activities.

Table 3. Role of credit program participation on early marriage, practice of dowry and the bride price in taka

Credit program	Early marriage	Practice of dowry	Bride price
<i>Eligible to participate</i>			
BRAC only	65.5	60.1	24706
Other NGOs	64.1	51.8	18541
Non-participant	67.1	61.2	20083
<i>Not eligible or rich</i>	55.3	43.9	35944

The incidence of early marriage and dowry practices was higher among BRAC members than the members of other NGOs. While the causes of this difference were not explored, it is assumed that BRAC has the scope to reduce the gap by focusing more on the social development issues.

For correspondence:

Abdullahel Hadi
BRAC
Dhaka, Bangladesh
e-mail: shirsha@bangla.net