

Volume 22
Number 2
Year 2020
ISSN 1529-0905



Journal of
**BANGLADESH
STUDIES**



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Knotted Realities: Understanding What Delays Early and Child Marriage for Girls in Urban Slums of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh has the fourth-highest prevalence of early and child marriage in the world. This trend has declined slightly over the years, but there is a dearth of research regarding underlying reasons. This article explores the phenomenon of delayed marriage for women in the context of understudied urban slums, and seeks to understand both why it happens and its consequences. The article uses data from 14 in-depth interviews (IDI) of girls who delayed their marriage beyond their 18th year, and two focus group discussions (FGD) with adolescent girls and young women aged between 13-24 years from a larger mixed-methods study conducted in two slums of the cities of Dhaka and Chattogram. Findings reveal that the key reasons for delaying marriage are poverty, inability to pay dowry for girls perceived as older, and the pressing obligations faced by young girls in having to take care of their families. It was also found that positive family support, mostly among better-off families, allows some girls pursue education rather than be married off at an early age.

Keywords: Child marriage, delayed marriage, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

Background

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) defines child marriage as a "formal or informal union where one or both parties are under the age of 18". This means that around 720 million women alive today were married before they reached their 18th year (UNICEF, 2013). Of these, almost 50% reside in South Asia (UNICEF, 2016a), with every one in two women being in this category (Verma, Sinha, and Khanna, 2013). Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage within the South Asian region (UNICEF, 2016b) and the fourth highest internationally (UNICEF, 2016c). About 38 million girls and women residing in Bangladesh were married before they turned 18, with 13 million