

BMJ Paediatrics Open

BMJ Paediatrics Open is committed to open peer review. As part of this commitment we make the peer review history of every article we publish publicly available.

When an article is published we post the peer reviewers' comments and the authors' responses online. We also post the versions of the paper that were used during peer review. These are the versions that the peer review comments apply to.

The versions of the paper that follow are the versions that were submitted during the peer review process. They are not the versions of record or the final published versions. They should not be cited or distributed as the published version of this manuscript.

BMJ Paediatrics Open is an open access journal and the full, final, typeset and author-corrected version of record of the manuscript is available on our site with no access controls, subscription charges or pay-per-view fees (<http://bmjpaedsopen.bmj.com>).

If you have any questions on BMJ Paediatrics Open's open peer review process please email info.bmjpo@bmj.com

BMJ Paediatrics Open

COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: Emergency call to action

Journal:	<i>BMJ Paediatrics Open</i>
Manuscript ID	bmjpo-2021-001328
Article Type:	Original research letter
Date Submitted by the Author:	22-Oct-2021
Complete List of Authors:	Hossain, Md. Jamal; State University of Bangladesh, Soma, Mahfuza Afroz ; University of Asia Pacific Bari, Md. Sazzadul; State University of Bangladesh, Pharmacy Emran, Talha Bin; BGC Trust University Bangladesh, Pharmacy Islam, Md.; University of Asia Pacific
Keywords:	Child Abuse, Child Psychiatry, COVID-19

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts



I, the Submitting Author has the right to grant and does grant on behalf of all authors of the Work (as defined in the below author licence), an exclusive licence and/or a non-exclusive licence for contributions from authors who are: i) UK Crown employees; ii) where BMJ has agreed a CC-BY licence shall apply, and/or iii) in accordance with the terms applicable for US Federal Government officers or employees acting as part of their official duties; on a worldwide, perpetual, irrevocable, royalty-free basis to BMJ Publishing Group Ltd ("BMJ") its licensees and where the relevant Journal is co-owned by BMJ to the co-owners of the Journal, to publish the Work in this journal and any other BMJ products and to exploit all rights, as set out in our [licence](#).

The Submitting Author accepts and understands that any supply made under these terms is made by BMJ to the Submitting Author unless you are acting as an employee on behalf of your employer or a postgraduate student of an affiliated institution which is paying any applicable article publishing charge ("APC") for Open Access articles. Where the Submitting Author wishes to make the Work available on an Open Access basis (and intends to pay the relevant APC), the terms of reuse of such Open Access shall be governed by a Creative Commons licence – details of these licences and which [Creative Commons](#) licence will apply to this Work are set out in our licence referred to above.

Other than as permitted in any relevant BMJ Author's Self Archiving Policies, I confirm this Work has not been accepted for publication elsewhere, is not being considered for publication elsewhere and does not duplicate material already published. I confirm all authors consent to publication of this Work and authorise the granting of this licence.

1
2
3 1 *Article type: Research Letter*
4

5 2 **Title**
6

7 3 **COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: Emergency call to action**
8
9

10 4 **Authors**
11

12
13 5 **Md. Jamal Hossain¹, Mahfuza Afroz Soma², Md. Sazzadul Bari¹, Talha Bin Emran³, Md.**
14 6 **Rabiul Islam²**
15

16
17 7 ¹ Department of Pharmacy, State University of Bangladesh, 77 Satmasjid Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205,
18 8 Bangladesh
19

20 9 ² Department of Pharmacy, University of Asia Pacific, 74/A Green Road, Farmgate, Dhaka 1215,
21 10 Bangladesh
22

23 11 ³ Department of Pharmacy, BGC Trust University Bangladesh, Chittagong 4381, Bangladesh
24
25 12

26
27 13 *** Correspondence**
28

29 14 **Md. Jamal Hossain**

30 15 Department of Pharmacy, State University of Bangladesh, 77 Satmasjid Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205,
31 16 Bangladesh
32

33 17 **Email:** jamal.du.p48@gmail.com
34

35 18 jamalhossain@sub.edu.bd
36
37 19

38
39 20
40
41 21 **Keywords:** *Early Marriage; COVID-19 Pandemic; Prolonged School Closures; Sustainable Development*
42 22 *Goal; Bangladesh*
43
44 23

45
46
47 24 **Word Count:** 594 (excluding title page, abstract, references, figures and tables)
48
49

50 25 **References count:** 6
51
52 26
53
54
55 27
56
57

28 29 **COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: Emergency call to action**

31 **Abstract**

32 The social burden of Bangladesh's already prevalent child marriage problem has further flared up
33 amid the ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This letter aims to briefly
34 report on the current scenario of the uncontrolled extent of underage marriage and draw the
35 concerned authorities' attention. The prevalence of child marriage has augmented by at least 13%
36 due to pandemic-enforced long-term school closure throughout the country, while many cases
37 remain unreported. Exacerbated financial crisis, the prolonged shutdown of educational
38 institutions, and social insecurities are the principal triggering factors for such a high pace of child
39 marriages. Understandably, the government and the local administrations must realize and address
40 the current situation through their concerted efforts to hinder and downgrade the early marriage
41 crisis in Bangladesh.

42 **Keywords:** *Early Marriage; COVID-19 Pandemic; Prolonged School Closures; Sustainable*
43 *Development Goal; Bangladesh*

45 **Main text**

46 Child marriage, especially involving female teenagers or adolescents to much older male
47 counterparts, has been a long-standing socioeconomic crisis in Bangladesh. About 51% of women
48 in the country aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 18 years.¹ The current number of
49 child brides surmounts to a staggering 38 million, while around 13 million of them have been
50 forced into marriage even before 15 years of age.² In the pre-COVID-19 era, Bangladesh had
51 invested tremendous efforts in preventing child marriages. Subsequently, over the decade of 2007-
52 2017, the national figure of child marriage downsized from 66% to 59%, whereas marriage before
53 16 years of age plummeted from 46% to 32%.² Despite the transient progress, thousands of child
54 marriages are regularly occurring in the country, particularly in the rural and underdeveloped

1
2
3 55 regions. Nevertheless, child marriage cases have again gained momentum by increasing at least
4 56 13% over the past year corresponding to the highest incidences of child marriages in Bangladesh
5 57 during the COVID-19 pandemic era.³ Along with the entire country, the most unfortunate incidents
6 58 were reported from Rajshahi, Khulna, Kurigram, and Bagerhat, with around 6500, 3000, 2950,
7 59 and 3200 child marriage cases, respectively, during the last 18 months of the COVID-19
8 60 lockdown.^{2,4,5} Among the 103 thousand high school female students of the Rajshahi district, 6512
9 61 (around 6.3%) were victimized by underage marriage amid the school closure, where the largest
10 62 share (n = 1785; 27.4%) was reported from Bagmara Upazila of the district.²

11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18 63 Since early 2020, there has been a dramatic upsurge in the prevalence of underage marriage,
19 64 unintended pregnancies, and gender-based violence in Bangladesh.⁶ Exacerbated poverty,
20 65 prolonged school closures, service interruptions, social security concerns, family honor, societal
21 66 norms, customary or religious regulations, parental deaths, and other social and familial factors
22 67 have significantly escalated this unexpected marriage amid the ongoing pandemic. Additionally,
23 68 the institutional shutdown may encourage female students from financially challenged and
24 69 backward families to drop out of school and never return. Moreover, loss of the regular income
25 70 source aggravated economic vulnerability, which resulted in an inclination towards low-cost
26 71 marriage ceremonies to shorten the family members and alleviate existing financial burdens.

27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34 72 Regarding the complete abolition of child marriage practice, the government of Bangladesh has
35 73 been maintaining a resolute and unwavering commitment to meet the Sustainable Development
36 74 Goal (SDG) and the National Target by 2030 and 2041, respectively. Eventually, the government
37 75 adopted several synchronous policies and implemented many actionable measures at root levels.
38 76 However, the progress in curbing underage marriage has been substantially disrupted during the
39 77 COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the government and its development partners, private sector
40 78 stakeholders, and relevant non-government organizations must step forward in a coalition to
41 79 reanalyze the current scenario and undertake competitive initiatives to undermine the sudden
42 80 outrage of this crisis.

43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50 81 Since institutional shutdowns have been contributing to educational discontinuation and
51 82 subsequent enforcement of child marriages, respective institutional authorities, in assistance of
52 83 other available social infrastructures, should reach out to the vulnerable families and establish
53 84 regular communication with them to prevent any mishap from happening. Moreover, stringent

1
2
3 85 enforcement of existing laws must be ensured by local administration to combat child marriage
4 and its adverse impacts. The government should also concentrate on developing sturdy and reliable
5 86 policies to support young girls who are at greater risk of undergoing early marriage and sexual
6 harassment. Educational campaigns require to promote public knowledge regarding reproductive
7 87 health and contraception. Moreover, women empowerment, technical and financial aid to
8 88 distressed and victimized women, and proper pedagogy on the mental and physical implications
9 of underage marriage, must be emphasized urgently to curb this child marriage syndemic during
10 89 the COVID-19 pandemic era.
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19

20 94 **Statements**

21 95 **Patient and public involvement**

22
23
24
25 96 Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, or conduct, or reporting, or
26 97 dissemination plans of this research.
27
28

29 98 **Funding**

30 99 This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or
31 not-for-profit sectors.
32
33
34

35 101 **Competing Interests**

36
37 102 None declared.
38
39

40 103 **Contributors**

41
42 104 MJH conceived the idea and collected data. MJH and MAS drafted the original version of the
43 manuscript. MJH, MSB, TBE, and MRI critically reviewed the manuscript. All authors reviewed
44 105 and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.
45
46
47
48
49

50 108 **References**

- 51
52
53 109 1. UNICEF. Ending child marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh.
54 110 <https://data.unicef.org/resources/ending-child-marriage-a-profile-of-progress-in-bangladesh/>
55 (Accessed September 1, 2021)
56 111

- 1
2
3 112 2. Dhaka Tribune. 6,500 Rajshahi students became child brides amid pandemic. Available
4 113 from: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi->
5 114 [students-became-child-brides-amid-](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi-)
6 115 [pandemic?fbclid=IwAR17VS7DCeoUfU9Ks3PSBEmk5mliDBHVO2L4J6N4E9WjdiT](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi-)
7 116 [Z_kTuZNeLZZw](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi-) (Accessed October 20, 2021)
8
9
10
11
12 117 3. Dhaka Tribune. Child marriage up 13% during Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh.
13 118 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2021/03/28/child-marriage-up->
14 119 [13-during-covid-19-pandemic-in-bangladesh](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2021/03/28/child-marriage-up-) (Accessed September 1, 2021)
15
16
17 120 4. Dhaka Tribune. 3,000 students become child brides in Khulna during pandemic. Available
18 121 from: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/09/29/3-000-students-become->
19 122 [child-brides-in-khulna-during-pandemic](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/09/29/3-000-students-become-) (Accessed October 20, 2021)
20
21
22 123 5. Asia-Pacific. Child marriages become epidemic during pandemic in Bangladesh. Available
23 124 from: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/child-marriages-become-epidemic-during->
24 125 [pandemic-in-bangladesh/2396364](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/child-marriages-become-epidemic-during-) (Accessed October 20, 2021)
25
26
27 126 6. Islam MR, Hossain MJ. Increments of gender-based violence amid COVID-19 in Bangladesh:
28 127 A threat to global public health and women's health. *Int J Health Plann Manage*. 2021 Jul
29 128 12:10.1002/hpm.3284. doi: 10.1002/hpm.3284.

BMJ Paediatrics Open

COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: Emergency call to action

Journal:	<i>BMJ Paediatrics Open</i>
Manuscript ID	bmjpo-2021-001328.R1
Article Type:	Original research letter
Date Submitted by the Author:	27-Oct-2021
Complete List of Authors:	Hossain, Md. Jamal; State University of Bangladesh, Soma, Mahfuza Afroz ; University of Asia Pacific Bari, Md. Sazzadul; State University of Bangladesh, Pharmacy Emran, Talha Bin; BGC Trust University Bangladesh, Pharmacy Islam, Md.; University of Asia Pacific
Keywords:	Child Abuse, Child Psychiatry, COVID-19

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts



I, the Submitting Author has the right to grant and does grant on behalf of all authors of the Work (as defined in the below author licence), an exclusive licence and/or a non-exclusive licence for contributions from authors who are: i) UK Crown employees; ii) where BMJ has agreed a CC-BY licence shall apply, and/or iii) in accordance with the terms applicable for US Federal Government officers or employees acting as part of their official duties; on a worldwide, perpetual, irrevocable, royalty-free basis to BMJ Publishing Group Ltd ("BMJ") its licensees and where the relevant Journal is co-owned by BMJ to the co-owners of the Journal, to publish the Work in this journal and any other BMJ products and to exploit all rights, as set out in our [licence](#).

The Submitting Author accepts and understands that any supply made under these terms is made by BMJ to the Submitting Author unless you are acting as an employee on behalf of your employer or a postgraduate student of an affiliated institution which is paying any applicable article publishing charge ("APC") for Open Access articles. Where the Submitting Author wishes to make the Work available on an Open Access basis (and intends to pay the relevant APC), the terms of reuse of such Open Access shall be governed by a Creative Commons licence – details of these licences and which [Creative Commons](#) licence will apply to this Work are set out in our licence referred to above.

Other than as permitted in any relevant BMJ Author's Self Archiving Policies, I confirm this Work has not been accepted for publication elsewhere, is not being considered for publication elsewhere and does not duplicate material already published. I confirm all authors consent to publication of this Work and authorise the granting of this licence.

1
2
3 1 *Article type: Research Letter*
4

5 2 **Title**

6
7
8 3 **COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: Emergency call to action**
9

10 4 **Authors**

11
12
13 5 **Md. Jamal Hossain¹, Mahfuza Afroz Soma², Md. Sazzadul Bari¹, Talha Bin Emran³, Md.**
14 6 **Rabiul Islam²**

15
16
17 7 ¹ Department of Pharmacy, State University of Bangladesh, 77 Satmasjid Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205,
18 8 Bangladesh

19
20 9 ² Department of Pharmacy, University of Asia Pacific, 74/A Green Road, Farmgate, Dhaka 1215,
21 10 Bangladesh

22
23 11 ³ Department of Pharmacy, BGC Trust University Bangladesh, Chittagong 4381, Bangladesh
24
25 12

26
27 13 *** Correspondence**

28
29 14 **Md. Jamal Hossain**

30
31 15 Department of Pharmacy, State University of Bangladesh, 77 Satmasjid Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205,
32 16 Bangladesh

33
34 17 **Email:** jamal.du.p48@gmail.com

35 18 jamalhossain@sub.edu.bd
36
37 19

38
39 20
40
41 21 **Keywords:** *Early Marriage; COVID-19 Pandemic; Prolonged School Closures; Sustainable Development*
42 22 *Goal; Bangladesh*
43
44
45 23

46
47
48 24 **Word Count:** 709 (excluding title page, abstract, references, figures and tables)
49

50 25 **References count:** 6
51
52
53 26
54
55
56 27

28 29 **COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: Emergency call to action**

31 **Abstract**

32 The social burden of Bangladesh's already prevalent child marriage problem has further flared up
33 amid the ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. We aim to briefly report on
34 the current scenario of underage marriage in Bangladesh from available sources and highlight
35 concerns. The prevalence of child marriage has augmented by at least 13% due to pandemic-
36 enforced long-term school closure throughout the country, while many cases remain unreported.
37 Exacerbated financial crisis, the prolonged shutdown of educational institutions, and social
38 insecurities are the principal triggering factors for such a high pace of child marriages. We urge
39 the government and local administrations to address the current situation through concerted and
40 integrated efforts to combat the early marriage crisis in Bangladesh.

42 **Keywords:** *Early Marriage; COVID-19 Pandemic; Prolonged School Closures; Sustainable*
43 *Development Goal; Bangladesh*

45 **Main text**

46 Child marriage, especially involving female teenagers or adolescents to much older male
47 counterparts, has been a long-standing socioeconomic crisis in Bangladesh with the highest rate in
48 Asia and fourth-highest globally.¹ About 59% of women in the country aged 20-24 years were
49 married before the age of 18 years.¹ The current number of child brides is a staggering 38 million,
50 while around 13 million of them have been forced into marriage even before 15 years of age.² In
51 the pre-COVID-19 era, Bangladesh had invested tremendous efforts in preventing child marriages.
52 Subsequently, over the decade of 2007- 2017, child marriages reduced nationally from 66% to
53 59%, whereas marriage before 16 years of age plummeted from 46% to 32%.² Despite the transient
54 progress, thousands of child marriages are regularly occurring in the country, particularly in the

1
2
3 55 rural and underdeveloped regions. Nevertheless, child marriage cases have again gained
4 56 momentum by increasing at least 13% over the past year corresponding to the highest incidences
5 57 of child marriages in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic era.³ Due to a lack of country-
6 58 wide surveillance or data gap, it is unlikely to state the actual statistics of child marriage in
7
8 59 Bangladesh. However, it might be easily comprehended from various media reports or NGOs' data
9
10 60 about child marriage during COVID-19 lockdown in Bangladesh. A survey conducted in 13
11
12 61 districts revealed that around 11,000 early marriages occurred between March 17, 2020, to
13
14 62 September 12, 2021.⁴ In contrast, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) has reported 13,886 child
15
16 63 marriages that happened from March to September of 2020 in 21 districts of Bangladesh.⁴ Along
17
18 64 with the entire country, the most unfortunate incidents were reported from Rajshahi, Khulna,
19
20 65 Kurigram, and Bagerhat, with around 6500, 3000, 2950, and 3200 child marriage cases,
21
22 66 respectively, during the last 18 months of the COVID-19 lockdown.^{2,4,5} Among the 103 thousand
23
24 67 high school female students of the Rajshahi district, 6512 (around 6.3%) were victimized by
25
26 68 underage marriage amid the school closure, where the largest share (n = 1785; 27.4%) was reported
27
28 69 from Bagmara Upazila of the district.²

29 70 Since early 2020, there has been a dramatic upsurge in the prevalence of underage marriage,
30
31 71 unintended pregnancies, and gender-based violence in Bangladesh.⁶ Exacerbated poverty,
32
33 72 prolonged school closures, service interruptions, social security concerns, family honor, societal
34
35 73 norms, customary or religious regulations, parental deaths, and other social and familial factors
36
37 74 have significantly escalated this unexpected marriage amid the ongoing pandemic. Additionally,
38
39 75 the institutional shutdown may encourage female students from financially challenged and
40
41 76 backward families to drop out of school and never return. Evidence demonstrated that 71% of
42
43 77 underage marriages in Bangladesh occurred due to the school closure amid the ongoing COVID-
44
45 78 19 pandemic.¹ Moreover, loss of the regular income source aggravated economic vulnerability,
46
47 79 which resulted in an inclination towards low-cost marriage ceremonies to shorten the family
48
49 80 members and alleviate existing financial burdens.

50 81 Regarding the complete abolition of child marriage practice, the government of Bangladesh has
51
52 82 been maintaining a resolute and unwavering commitment to meet the Sustainable Development
53
54 83 Goal (SDG) and the National Target by 2030 and 2041, respectively. Eventually, the government
55
56 84 adopted several synchronous policies and implemented many actionable measures at root levels.
57
58 85 However, the progress in curbing underage marriage has been substantially disrupted during the

1
2
3 86 COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the government and its development partners, private sector
4
5 87 stakeholders, and relevant non-government organizations must step forward in a coalition to
6
7 88 reanalyze the current scenario and undertake competitive initiatives to undermine the sudden
8
9 89 outrage of this crisis.

10
11 90 Since institutional shutdowns have been contributing to educational discontinuation and
12
13 91 subsequent enforcement of child marriages, respective institutional authorities, in assistance of
14
15 92 other available social infrastructures, should reach out to the vulnerable families and establish
16
17 93 regular communication with them to prevent any mishap from happening. Moreover, stringent
18
19 94 enforcement of existing laws must be ensured by local administration to combat child marriage
20
21 95 and its adverse impacts. The government should also concentrate on developing sturdy and reliable
22
23 96 policies to support young girls who are at greater risk of undergoing early marriage and sexual
24
25 97 harassment. Educational campaigns require to promote public knowledge regarding reproductive
26
27 98 health and contraception. Moreover, women empowerment, technical and financial aid to
28
29 99 distressed and victimized women, and proper pedagogy on the mental and physical implications
30
31 100 of underage marriage, must be emphasized urgently to curb this child marriage syndemic during
32
33 101 the COVID-19 pandemic era.

34 103 **Statements**

35 104 **Patient and public involvement**

36
37 105 Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, or conduct, or reporting, or
38
39 106 dissemination plans of this research.

40 107 **Funding**

41 108 This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or
42
43 109 not-for-profit sectors.

44 110 **Competing Interests**

45 111 None declared.

46 112 **Contributors**

1
2
3 113 MJH conceived the idea and collected data. MJH and MAS drafted the original version of the
4
5 114 manuscript. MJH, MSB, TBE, and MRI critically reviewed the manuscript. All authors reviewed
6
7 115 and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.
8

9 116

11 117 **References**

- 12
13
14 118 1. Afrin T, Zainuddin M. Spike in child marriage in Bangladesh during COVID-19: Determinants
15
16 119 and interventions. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2021; 112: 104918. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104918.
17
18 120 2. Dhaka Tribune. 6,500 Rajshahi students became child brides amid pandemic. Available
19
20 121 from: [https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi-students-](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi-students-became-child-brides-amid-pandemic?)
21
22 122 [became-child-brides-amid-pandemic?](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi-students-became-child-brides-amid-pandemic?) (Accessed October 20, 2021)
23
24 123 3. Dhaka Tribune. Child marriage up 13% during Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh.
25
26 124 [https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2021/03/28/child-marriage-up-](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2021/03/28/child-marriage-up-13-during-covid-19-pandemic-in-bangladesh)
27
28 125 [13-during-covid-19-pandemic-in-bangladesh](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2021/03/28/child-marriage-up-13-during-covid-19-pandemic-in-bangladesh) (Accessed September 1, 2021)
29
30 126 4. Roy P, Basher M. Child marriage in pandemic: A scourge returns on tiptoe. Daily Star.
31
32 127 Available from: [https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/child-marriage-](https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/child-marriage-pandemic-scurge-returns-tiptoe-2195446)
33
34 128 [pandemic-scurge-returns-tiptoe-2195446](https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/child-marriage-pandemic-scurge-returns-tiptoe-2195446) (Accessed October 26, 2021)
35
36 129 5. Asia-Pacific. Child marriages become epidemic during pandemic in Bangladesh. Available
37
38 130 from: [https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/child-marriages-become-epidemic-during-](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/child-marriages-become-epidemic-during-pandemic-in-bangladesh/2396364)
39
40 131 [pandemic-in-bangladesh/2396364](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/child-marriages-become-epidemic-during-pandemic-in-bangladesh/2396364) (Accessed October 20, 2021)
41
42 132 6. Islam MR, Hossain MJ. Increments of gender-based violence amid COVID-19 in Bangladesh:
43
44 133 A threat to global public health and women's health. *Int J Health Plann Manage.* 2021 Jul
45
46 134 12:10.1002/hpm.3284. doi: 10.1002/hpm.3284.

BMJ Paediatrics Open

COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: Emergency call to action

Journal:	<i>BMJ Paediatrics Open</i>
Manuscript ID	bmjpo-2021-001328.R2
Article Type:	Original research letter
Date Submitted by the Author:	01-Nov-2021
Complete List of Authors:	Hossain, Md. Jamal; State University of Bangladesh, Soma, Mahfuza Afroz ; University of Asia Pacific Bari, Md. Sazzadul; State University of Bangladesh, Pharmacy Emran, Talha Bin; BGC Trust University Bangladesh, Pharmacy Islam, Md.; University of Asia Pacific
Keywords:	Child Abuse, Child Psychiatry, COVID-19

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts



I, the Submitting Author has the right to grant and does grant on behalf of all authors of the Work (as defined in the below author licence), an exclusive licence and/or a non-exclusive licence for contributions from authors who are: i) UK Crown employees; ii) where BMJ has agreed a CC-BY licence shall apply, and/or iii) in accordance with the terms applicable for US Federal Government officers or employees acting as part of their official duties; on a worldwide, perpetual, irrevocable, royalty-free basis to BMJ Publishing Group Ltd ("BMJ") its licensees and where the relevant Journal is co-owned by BMJ to the co-owners of the Journal, to publish the Work in this journal and any other BMJ products and to exploit all rights, as set out in our [licence](#).

The Submitting Author accepts and understands that any supply made under these terms is made by BMJ to the Submitting Author unless you are acting as an employee on behalf of your employer or a postgraduate student of an affiliated institution which is paying any applicable article publishing charge ("APC") for Open Access articles. Where the Submitting Author wishes to make the Work available on an Open Access basis (and intends to pay the relevant APC), the terms of reuse of such Open Access shall be governed by a Creative Commons licence – details of these licences and which [Creative Commons](#) licence will apply to this Work are set out in our licence referred to above.

Other than as permitted in any relevant BMJ Author's Self Archiving Policies, I confirm this Work has not been accepted for publication elsewhere, is not being considered for publication elsewhere and does not duplicate material already published. I confirm all authors consent to publication of this Work and authorise the granting of this licence.

1
2
3 1 *Article type: Research Letter*
4

5 2 **Title**

6
7
8 3 **COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: Emergency call to action**
9

10 4 **Authors**

11
12
13 5 **Md. Jamal Hossain¹, Mahfuza Afroz Soma², Md. Sazzadul Bari¹, Talha Bin Emran³, Md.**
14 6 **Rabiul Islam²**

15
16
17 7 ¹ Department of Pharmacy, State University of Bangladesh, 77 Satmasjid Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205,
18 8 Bangladesh

19
20 9 ² Department of Pharmacy, University of Asia Pacific, 74/A Green Road, Farmgate, Dhaka 1215,
21 10 Bangladesh

22
23 11 ³ Department of Pharmacy, BGC Trust University Bangladesh, Chittagong 4381, Bangladesh
24

25 12
26
27 13 *** Correspondence**

28
29 14 **Md. Jamal Hossain**

30 15 Department of Pharmacy, State University of Bangladesh, 77 Satmasjid Road, Dhanmondi, Dhaka-1205,
31 16 Bangladesh

32 17 **Email:** jamal.du.p48@gmail.com

33
34 18 jamalhossain@sub.edu.bd
35
36
37 19
38
39 20
40
41

42 21 **Keywords:** *Early Marriage; COVID-19 Pandemic; Prolonged School Closures; Sustainable Development*
43 22 *Goal; Bangladesh*
44
45
46 23

47
48 24 **Word Count:** 709 (excluding title page, abstract, references, figures and tables)
49

50 25 **References count:** 6
51
52
53 26
54
55
56 27
57
58
59
60

28 29 **COVID-19 and child marriage in Bangladesh: Emergency call to action**

31 **Abstract**

32 The social burden of Bangladesh's already prevalent child marriage problem has further flared up
33 amid the ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. We aim to briefly report on
34 the current scenario of underage marriage in Bangladesh from available sources and highlight
35 concerns. The prevalence of child marriage has augmented by at least 13% due to pandemic-
36 enforced long-term school closure throughout the country, while many cases remain unreported.
37 Exacerbated financial crisis, the prolonged shutdown of educational institutions, and social
38 insecurities are the principal triggering factors for such a high pace of child marriages. We urge
39 the government and local administrations to address the current situation through concerted and
40 integrated efforts to combat the early marriage crisis in Bangladesh.

42 **Keywords:** *Early Marriage; COVID-19 Pandemic; Prolonged School Closures; Sustainable*
43 *Development Goal; Bangladesh*

45 **Main text**

46 Child marriage, especially involving female teenagers or adolescents to much older male
47 counterparts, has been a long-standing socioeconomic crisis in Bangladesh with the highest rate in
48 Asia and fourth-highest globally.¹ About 59% of women in the country aged 20-24 years were
49 married before the age of 18 years.¹ The current number of child brides is a staggering 38 million,
50 while around 13 million of them have been forced into marriage even before 15 years of age.² In
51 the pre-COVID-19 era, Bangladesh had invested tremendous efforts in preventing child marriages.
52 Subsequently, over the decade of 2007- 2017, child marriages reduced nationally from 66% to
53 59%, whereas marriage before 16 years of age plummeted from 46% to 32%.² Despite the transient
54 progress, thousands of child marriages are regularly occurring in the country, particularly in the

1
2
3 55 rural and underdeveloped regions. Nevertheless, child marriage cases have again gained
4 56 momentum by increasing at least 13% over the past year in Bangladesh, coinciding with the
5 57 COVID-19 pandemic.³ Due to a lack of country-wide surveillance or data gaps, we do not have
6 58 the actual statistics of child marriage in Bangladesh. What we have are various media reports and
7 59 non-government organizations' data collation about child marriage during the COVID-19
8 60 lockdown in Bangladesh. A survey conducted in 13 districts revealed that around 11,000 early
9 61 marriages occurred between March 17, 2020, to September 12, 2021.⁴ In contrast, Manusher Jonno
10 62 Foundation (MJF) has reported 13,886 child marriages that happened from March to September
11 63 of 2020 in 21 districts of Bangladesh.⁴ Along with the entire country, the most unfortunate
12 64 incidents were reported from Rajshahi, Khulna, Kurigram, and Bagerhat, with around 6500, 3000,
13 65 2950, and 3200 child marriage cases, respectively, during the last 18 months of the COVID-19
14 66 lockdown.^{2,4,5} Among the 103,407 high school female students of the Rajshahi district, 6512
15 67 (around 6.3%) were subjected to underage marriage during school closures, with the largest share
16 68 (n = 1785; 27.4%) reported from Bagmara Upazila of the district.²

17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28 69 Since early 2020, there has been a dramatic upsurge in the prevalence of underage marriage,
29 70 unintended pregnancies, and gender-based violence in Bangladesh.⁶ Increased poverty, prolonged
30 71 school closures, service interruptions, social security concerns, family honour, societal norms,
31 72 customary or religious regulations, parental deaths, and other social and familial factors have all
32 73 contributed to this unexpected upsurge in child marriages amid the ongoing pandemic.
33 74 Additionally, the institutional shutdown may encourage female students from financially
34 75 challenged and backward families to drop out of school and never return. Evidence demonstrated
35 76 that 71% of underage marriages in Bangladesh occurred due to the school closure amid the ongoing
36 77 COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Moreover, the loss of the regular income aggravated economic
37 78 vulnerability, which resulted in an inclination towards low-cost marriage ceremonies to alleviate
38 79 existing financial burdens.

39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48 80 Regarding the complete abolition of child marriage practice, the government of Bangladesh has
49 81 been maintaining a resolute and unwavering commitment to meet the Sustainable Development
50 82 Goal (SDG) and the National Target by 2030 and 2041, respectively. Eventually, the government
51 83 adopted several synchronous policies and implemented many actionable measures at root levels.
52 84 However, the progress in curbing underage marriage has been substantially disrupted during the

85 COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the government and its development partners, private sector
86 stakeholders, and relevant non-government organizations must step forward in a coalition to
87 reanalyze the current scenario and undertake competitive initiatives to undermine the sudden
88 outrage of this crisis.

89 Since institutional shutdowns have been contributing to educational discontinuation and
90 subsequent enforcement of child marriages, respective institutional authorities, in assistance of
91 other available social infrastructures, should reach out to the vulnerable families and establish
92 regular communication with them to prevent any mishap from happening. Moreover, stringent
93 enforcement of existing laws must be ensured by local administration to combat child marriage
94 and its adverse impacts. The government should also concentrate on developing sturdy and reliable
95 policies to support young girls who are at greater risk of undergoing early marriage and sexual
96 harassment. Educational campaigns require to promote public knowledge regarding reproductive
97 health and contraception. Moreover, women empowerment, technical and financial aid to
98 distressed and victimized women, and proper pedagogy on the mental and physical implications
99 of underage marriage, must be emphasized urgently to curb this child marriage syndemic during
100 the COVID-19 pandemic era.

101

102 **Statements**

103 **Patient and public involvement**

104 Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, or conduct, or reporting, or
105 dissemination plans of this research.

106 **Funding**

107 This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or
108 not-for-profit sectors.

109 **Competing Interests**

110 None declared.

111 **Contributors**

1
2
3 112 MJH conceived the idea and collected data. MJH and MAS drafted the original version of the
4
5 113 manuscript. MJH, MSB, TBE, and MRI critically reviewed the manuscript. All authors reviewed
6
7 114 and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.
8

9 115

10
11 **References**
12

- 13
14 117 1. Afrin T, Zainuddin M. Spike in child marriage in Bangladesh during COVID-19: Determinants
15
16 118 and interventions. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2021; 112: 104918. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104918.
17
18 119 2. Dhaka Tribune. 6,500 Rajshahi students became child brides amid pandemic. Available
19
20 120 from: [https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi-students-](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi-students-became-child-brides-amid-pandemic?)
21
22 121 [became-child-brides-amid-pandemic?](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/10/20/6-500-rajshahi-students-became-child-brides-amid-pandemic?) (Accessed October 20, 2021)
23
24 122 3. Dhaka Tribune. Child marriage up 13% during Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh.
25
26 123 [https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2021/03/28/child-marriage-up-](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2021/03/28/child-marriage-up-13-during-covid-19-pandemic-in-bangladesh)
27
28 124 [13-during-covid-19-pandemic-in-bangladesh](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2021/03/28/child-marriage-up-13-during-covid-19-pandemic-in-bangladesh) (Accessed September 1, 2021)
29
30 125 4. Roy P, Basher M. Child marriage in pandemic: A scourge returns on tiptoe. Daily Star.
31
32 126 Available from: [https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/child-marriage-](https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/child-marriage-pandemic-scurge-returns-tiptoe-2195446)
33
34 127 [pandemic-scurge-returns-tiptoe-2195446](https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/child-marriage-pandemic-scurge-returns-tiptoe-2195446) (Accessed October 26, 2021)
35
36 128 5. Asia-Pacific. Child marriages become epidemic during pandemic in Bangladesh. Available
37
38 129 from: [https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/child-marriages-become-epidemic-during-](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/child-marriages-become-epidemic-during-pandemic-in-bangladesh/2396364)
39
40 130 [pandemic-in-bangladesh/2396364](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/child-marriages-become-epidemic-during-pandemic-in-bangladesh/2396364) (Accessed October 20, 2021)
41
42 131 6. Islam MR, Hossain MJ. Increments of gender-based violence amid COVID-19 in Bangladesh:
43
44 132 A threat to global public health and women's health. *Int J Health Plann Manage.* 2021 Jul
45
46 133 12:10.1002/hpm.3284. doi: 10.1002/hpm.3284.