



CHILD MARRIAGE IN RURAL BANGLADESH

**Trends, factors and Nijera Kori's
efforts in prevention**

Lubna Jebin, Hashibul Hassan



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By Lubna Jebin and Hashibul Hassan

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Cover image. Early in the morning, the girls from the adolescent football team of Nijera Kori in Lalpur, Natore are diligently practicing. Photograph by: Hashibul Hassan.

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Acronyms

BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BIHS	Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey
FGD	Focused Group Discussion
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
HH	Household
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SVRS	Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics
UNO	Upazila Nirbahi Officer

যোন হয়রাণি প্রত্নরোধে

অভিযোগ

বন্ধ

নিজেরা করি

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Executive Summary

Child marriage, a deeply rooted issue in Bangladesh, disproportionately affects girls in rural areas. This report examines the trend and multifaceted causes of child marriage in rural Bangladesh, highlighting the interplay of traditional gender norms, socioeconomic factors, and the transformative role of the non-governmental organization (NGO), Nijera Kori, in dipping prevalence of child marriage. The research combines quantitative analysis of national surveys with qualitative insights from interviews and focus group discussions in Nijera Kori's working areas.

Based on an analysis of historical data, there is a notable trend of either increasing or consistently high rates of child marriage, coupled with a significant correlation between child marriage and early childbirth (79.6%). While general awareness of the legal minimum age of marriage is high, perceptions of government action differ between genders. The primary reasons for child marriage are the perceived suitability of the groom, existing marriage proposals, and poor economic conditions. Socio-demographic analysis shows child marriage is associated with lower educational attainment, earlier childbearing, reduced economic opportunities, and increased vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion.

On the contrary to the historical trend from the national representative sample survey, qualitative findings of this study indicate a decline in child marriage rates in the past 15 years in the study locations or Nijera Kori's working areas, attributed to various awareness programs implemented by both governmental and non-governmental organizations. However, some families still arrange child marriages secretly, which is also revealed by the national sample survey analysis. The Covid-19 pandemic led to a temporary resurgence of this practice due to financial hardship and school closures. Furthermore, child marriage becoming common among boys due to new employment opportunities in many areas.

Traditional gender norms remain the dominant factor, with beliefs about girls' value and the perceived need to protect family honor driving child

marriage. Increased access to ICT and irresponsible use of it has led to romantic relationships and elopement, sometimes leading to blackmail and coercion, further impacting family honor. Financial hardship also contributes, as families marry off their daughters to reduce economic burdens. Lack of parental and adolescent awareness about consequences, persuasion by local matchmakers, birth certificate falsification by local authorities, and religious beliefs and practices also play significant roles in child marriage.

In this context, Nijera Kori builds agency among adult and adolescent members to prevent child marriage through training and awareness programs. Adult members gain knowledge and confidence to address child marriage, while adolescent members focus on awareness of consequences, sexual and reproductive health, gender norms, and aspirations. Nijera Kori's programs empower individuals and communities to challenge harmful practices and support girls' education and well-being.

Based on our comprehensive interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with both adolescent and adult groups associated with Nijera Kori, several actionable policy recommendations have been developed. Key suggestions include implementing comprehensive gender equality training for local officials, religious leaders, and community influencers to highlight the harmful effects of child marriage and the benefits of empowering girls. Additionally, workshops and awareness campaigns for parents are essential to emphasize the importance of girls' education, health, and economic empowerment. Empowering youth through peer-to-peer education and digital platforms, expanding access to vocational training, and providing career guidance can also enhance economic independence and reduce vulnerability to child marriage. Moreover, encouraging participation in cultural activities and sports, establishing adolescent-friendly spaces, integrating digital literacy module into school curricula, and educating youth about responsible technology use are vital steps.

To further support these initiatives, the recommendations emphasize the importance of enhancing health education and ensuring access to quality healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive health. Mandatory

pre-marriage counseling sessions should be introduced, focusing on the legal age of marriage, the consequences of child marriage, and the benefits of delayed marriage. Multi-sectoral collaboration is also essential. A nationwide digital database for marriage registrations should be established and integrated with the national birth registration system to enable real-time age verification, thereby preventing underage marriages. Additionally, fostering partnerships between government agencies, NGOs, and community organizations is crucial to ensure the cultural relevance and sustainability of the programs. Strengthening data collection and monitoring systems to track the prevalence of child marriage and gender inequality, along with conducting rigorous impact assessments, will help measure program effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

Child marriage in rural Bangladesh is a complex issue with multiple interconnected factors. Addressing it requires a comprehensive approach that challenges traditional gender norms, promotes education and economic opportunities, and empowers girls and communities to make informed decisions about marriage. Nijera Kori's programs demonstrate the positive impact of community-based interventions in preventing child marriage and promoting gender equality.



চিত্র: একজন আদর্শ মেয়ে

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- ⇒ একজন আদর্শ মেয়ে গুরুত্বের সম্মান করে এবং ছোটদের যত্ন করে।

1 Introduction

Child marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18, is a pervasive issue with detrimental consequences for girls and societies. Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage globally, with 51.0% of girls marrying before their 18th birthday and 16.0% marrying before the age of 15 ([Girls Not Brides, 2024](#)). This occurs despite the legal age of marriage being 18 for females and 21 for males, as set by the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 ([Plan Bangladesh, 2013](#)); mainly due to the weak enforcement and provisions that permit child marriage in “special cases” ([Tauseef & Sufian, 2024](#)). This practice is more prevalent in rural areas, where 53.8% of girls are married before 18, compared to 44.0% in urban areas. Historically, poverty, lack of education, gender inequality, and social norms are significant contributing factors to the persistence of child marriage in Bangladesh. Girls from poorer families are often viewed as an economic burden, and marriage is considered a way to alleviate financial strain, secure their future, and uphold traditional gender norms. This disparity highlights the need for a focused investigation into the unique challenges and complexities of child marriage within the rural Bangladeshi context.

The preexisting situation of child marriage worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While the pandemic has affected various aspects of life, its impact on child marriage is particularly alarming. Although statistical evidence suggests that the rate of child marriage did not substantially increase during the pandemic, qualitative data indicates a rise in perceived child marriage rates. This discrepancy highlights the need for further investigation into the effect of the pandemic on child marriage. A study during Covid-19 found that at least 13,886 girls experienced child marriage between April and October 2020 in 21 districts ([Fletcher & Manusher Jonno Foundation \(MJF\), 2023](#)). It is highly plausible that the actual figure of child marriage significantly exceeds the officially reported figures. This finding indicates that despite the illegality and preventive efforts against child marriage, the pandemic fostered an environment where social and

economic pressures often overshadowed legal and ethical concerns. While officially recorded child marriage rates did not significantly increase, the pandemic heightened existing vulnerabilities, particularly for rural girls, due to school closures, economic hardship, and disruptions to health services.

Marrying before the age of 18 significantly limits a girl's access to education and employment opportunities, hindering their personal growth and potential, and other aspects of life ([Girls Not Brides, 2024](#)). One of the most alarming impacts of child marriage is the significant risk it poses to the physical health of young girls. Physiologically, their bodies are not prepared to handle the demands of pregnancy and childbirth, leading to a greater likelihood of maternal mortality, difficult deliveries, and infant deaths ([Patoari, 2020](#)). Girls under 15 experience a particularly dire reality, being five times more likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth compared to women in their 20s. Furthermore, children born to these young mothers are at a higher risk of low birth weight, premature birth, and even death.

Beyond the immediate physical dangers, child marriage also severely limits a girl's future prospects ([Plan Bangladesh, 2013](#)). Forced to drop out of school, these girls are denied the opportunity to gain an education and develop essential skills. This lack of education, in turn, restricts their employment options and earning potential, trapping them in a cycle of poverty ([Malé & Wodon, 2016](#)). The consequences extend beyond the individual, as child marriage perpetuates poverty across generations, impacting the girl's future children as well. A 2017 World Bank/ICRW study estimated that ending child marriage in Bangladesh could lead to a 12.0% increase in earnings and productivity for women ([Girls Not Brides, 2024](#)).

The social and emotional toll of child marriage is equally profound. Girls who are married off at a young age are robbed of their childhood, thrust prematurely into adult roles and responsibilities. This often leads to social isolation, as they are cut off from their peers and have limited mobility ([Parsons et al., 2015](#)). Tragically, child brides are also at a significantly higher risk of experiencing domestic and family violence, including physical, emotional, and sexual violence ([Kidman, 2016](#)). The trauma

resulting from these experiences can cause enduring emotional impacts, which may persist throughout an individual's lifetime and resistant to healing (Ricker et al., 2023).

Bangladesh Government has actively implemented various initiatives to combat child marriage. Furthermore, NGOs play a crucial role in supporting government efforts by working at the grassroots level to empower girls, raise awareness, and provide necessary support. Despite government and non-government efforts, challenges persist in terms of enforcement of laws, raising public awareness, and addressing the root causes of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. Effective collaboration between the government and NGOs is essential for sustainable progress, involving joint programs, capacity building, data sharing, and policy dialogue. To eradicate child marriage in Bangladesh, it is imperative to increase investment, strengthen law enforcement, engage communities, and focus on empowering girls.

In this context, this report delves deeply into the intricate dynamics of child marriage in rural Bangladesh, examining its trends, contributing factors, and the agency of women in preventing this harmful practice. The research adopts a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, seamlessly integrating secondary data analysis with qualitative insights obtained through a series of interviews conducted in various rural areas of Bangladesh. This multifaceted methodology, which encompasses the analysis of existing reports and statistical data, provides a holistic understanding of the issue, capturing both quantitative trends and the rich, lived experiences of women who have been directly affected by child marriage. The research, therefore, not only sheds light on the immediate factors contributing to child marriage but also explores the broader socio-economic and cultural context that reinforces this practice.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the national trend of child marriage and to explore the perceptions of both parents and girls regarding this issue. Through this investigation, the study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying causes and far-reaching consequences of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. Recognizing that

child marriage remains a significant challenge in these regions, the study delves into the socio-cultural and economic factors that perpetuate this practice and its impact on the lives of young girls and their families.

In addition to analyzing trends and perceptions, the study also aims to assess the role of a prominent Bangladesh-based NGO, Nijera Kori, in supporting rural individuals and communities in asserting their agency to navigate and combat child marriage. Nijera Kori has been instrumental in empowering communities and providing them with the tools and knowledge needed to challenge and overcome this harmful practice. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of Nijera Kori's programs and initiatives in raising awareness and fostering resilience against child marriage.

Specifically, the study has several focused objectives. *First*, it aims to analyze the trends and patterns of child marriage in rural Bangladesh using nationally representative sample surveys, particularly, Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) (UNICEF, 2019), Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS) (IFPRI, 2020) and Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (SVRS) survey. By examining the data collected from these surveys, the study intends to identify any shifts in the prevalence of child marriage over time and to pinpoint the regions most affected by this practice. *Second*, the study seeks to examine the factors contributing to child marriage, with an emphasis on understanding how families and communities exercise their agency to prevent it. This involves exploring the socio-economic and cultural factors that influence decisions related to child marriage and identifying the strategies employed by communities to resist it. *Lastly*, the study aims to assess the impact of various programs implemented by Nijera Kori in building awareness and asserting agency to prevent child marriage in rural Bangladesh. By evaluating these programs, the study aims to highlight successful interventions and recommend ways to scale and adapt these strategies to different contexts to effectively combat the practice of child marriage.

On the contrary to the historical trend from the national representative sample survey, qualitative findings of this study indicate a decline in child marriage rates in the past 15 years in the study locations or Nijera Kori's working areas, attributed to various awareness programs implemented by

both governmental and non-governmental organizations. However, the practice persists, with some families resorting to clandestine marriages to evade legal and societal restrictions. The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the situation, causing a resurgence in child marriage due to heightened economic hardship and school closures. While girls are disproportionately affected by child marriage, the study also highlights the impact on boys, who may be compelled to marry early due to new employment opportunities or family pressure.

This study also underscores the role of romantic relationships, facilitated by increased access to Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), in driving elopement and unregistered marriages, which can have serious legal and social consequences for young couples. Traditional gender norms, poverty, lack of education and awareness, and religious norms are identified as key drivers of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. In response to these challenges, Nijera Kori has implemented a range of programs aimed at empowering individuals and communities to challenge harmful norms and prevent child marriage through education, awareness campaigns, legal support, and economic empowerment initiatives. The organization's work has been instrumental in raising awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage and providing support to those at risk. By addressing the root causes of child marriage and promoting gender equality, Nijera Kori is helping to create a more just and equitable society, particularly for marginalized children in Bangladesh.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews existing research and data on child marriage, with a focus on historical trends, parental perceptions, and socio-demographic characteristics. Section 3 presents the aims and objectives of this study. Section 4 outlines the research design, including data collection methods (surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions) and ethical considerations. Section 5 showcases the findings and discussion, detailing the research results, trends, factors contributing to child marriage, and the role of Nijera Kori in building agency and preventing child marriage. Section 6 offers policy recommendations for addressing child marriage, based on the research findings. The report concludes with Section 7.

2 Child Marriage in Bangladesh: Historical Trends, Parental Perceptions and Socio-Demographic Characteristics

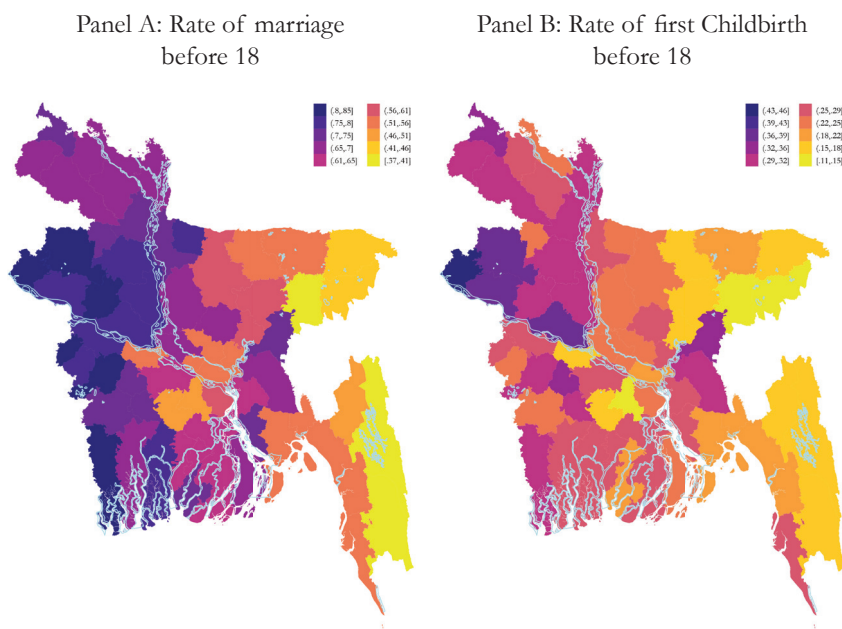
This section delves into the multifaceted issue of child marriage in Bangladesh, focusing specifically on trends, parental perceptions, and socio-demographic characteristics. It explores the patterns and prevalence of child marriage over time, drawing on national data to highlight regional variations and shifts in incidence rates. By examining parental perceptions, this section provides insights into the socio-cultural beliefs and economic pressures that influence child marriage decisions. Additionally, it analyzes the socio-demographic characteristics of affected communities, considering factors such as education levels, income, and geographic location, which play a critical role in perpetuating or mitigating the practice of child marriage. Through this comprehensive analysis, the section aims to shed light on the complex interplay of factors that sustain child marriage and to identify potential avenues for intervention and support.

2.1 Women's Marriage and Childbirth Age in Bangladesh

The following Figure 2-1 illustrates district-wise percentage of women who were married before the age of 18 (Panel A) and district-wise percentage of women who had their first childbirth before the age of 18 (Panel B). The data used for these are taken from MICS 2019 ([UNICEF, 2019](#)).



Figure 2-1. Marriage and first childbirth before 18



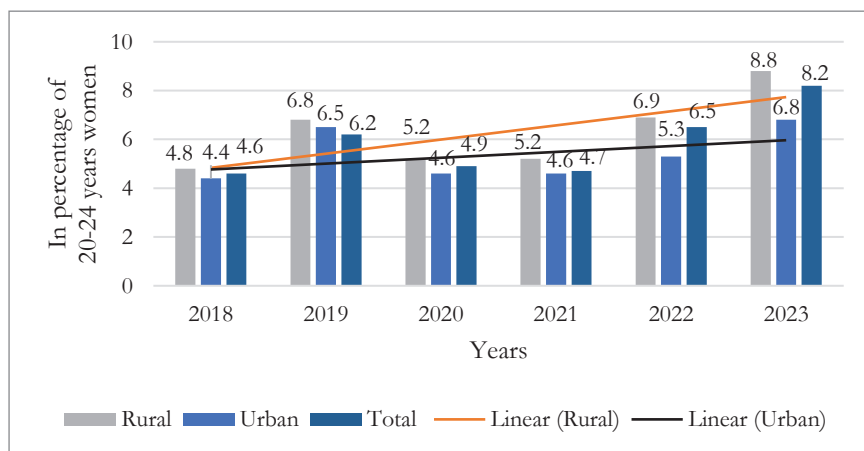
Source: Authors' estimation using MICS 2019 (UNICEF).

The correlation coefficient between these two maps is 79.6%, indicating a strong positive relationship between child marriage and early childbirth. This correlation is statistically significant at the 5.0% level of significance, underscoring the robustness of this association. Early childbirth poses significant health risks for young women, as their bodies may not be fully developed to handle the physical demands of pregnancy and childbirth, leading to complications such as obstetric fistula, premature birth, and even maternal mortality ([Patoari, 2020](#)). Furthermore, early motherhood often restricts educational and economic opportunities for young women, perpetuating cycles of poverty and gender inequality ([Malé & Wodon, 2016](#)). This strong correlation highlights the urgent need for interventions aimed at preventing child marriage to safeguard the health and well-being of women in these communities.

2.2 Historical Trend of Child Marriage

Figure 2-2 illustrates the percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married before reaching the age of 15. The data presented herein is sourced from the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (BSVS). The figure also illustrates the linear trend from 2018 to 2023, differentiated by rural and urban samples. It is apparent that, starting from an identical level in 2018, the trend in rural areas exhibits a more pronounced upward trajectory compared to the urban areas.

Figure 2-2. Marriage before the age of 15

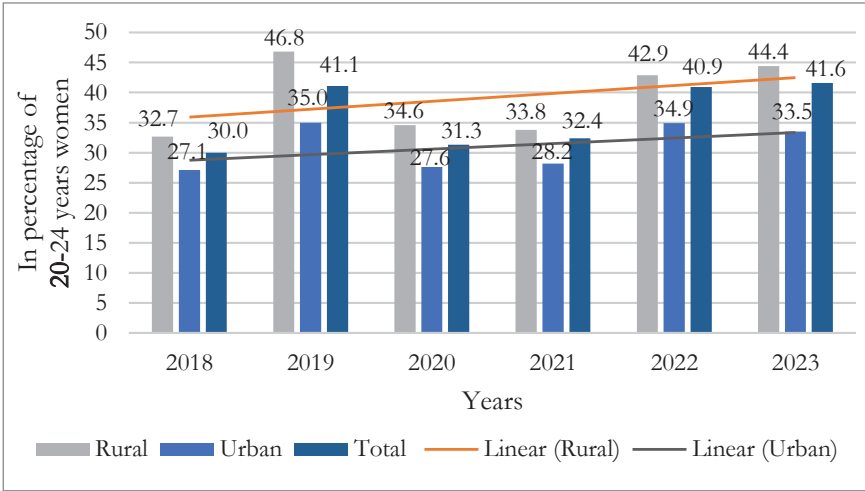


Source: Authors' estimation using Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics, BBS, GoB.

Similarly, Figure 2-3 depicts the percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married before the age of 18. This data, sourced from the same dataset, indicates a slight upward trend for both rural and urban samples. It is observed that pre-15 marriages are becoming more prevalent in rural areas compared to urban areas, while pre-18 marriages exhibit a similar trend. Notably, both rates have increased, with the pre-15 marriage rate rising from 4.2% to 8.2%, and the pre-18 marriage rate increasing from 30.0% to 41.6% in this nationally representative sample. The increasing trend of early marriages, especially those involving girls under the age

of 15, presents several significant issues, such as, health risk, access to education and career, perpetuates poverty cycle, psychological effects, economic ramifications, etc. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to raise awareness, enforce legal frameworks, and provide education and economic opportunities for girls and their families.

Figure 2-3. Marriage before the age of 18



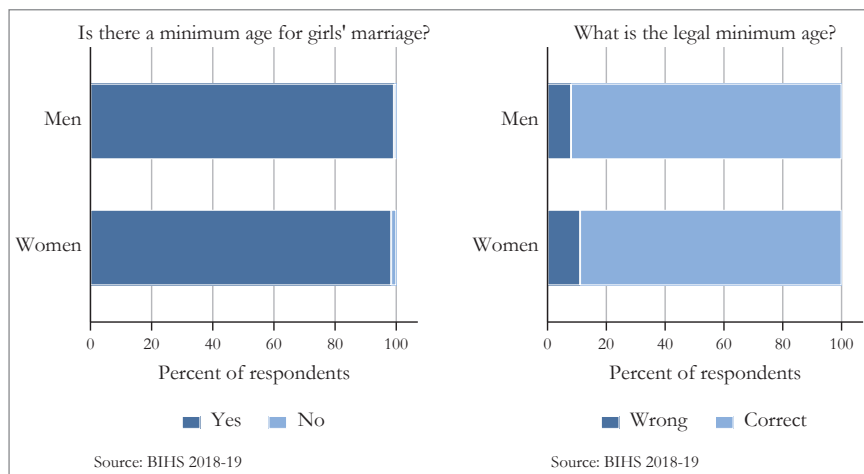
Source: Authors' estimation using Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics, BBS, GoB.



2.3 Perception about Child Marriage

Figure 2-4 illustrates the general awareness among the rural population regarding the minimum legal age for girls' marriage. These estimates are based on the BIHS 2018-19 data (IFPRI, 2020).

Figure 2-4. General awareness about minimum age for marriage of girls

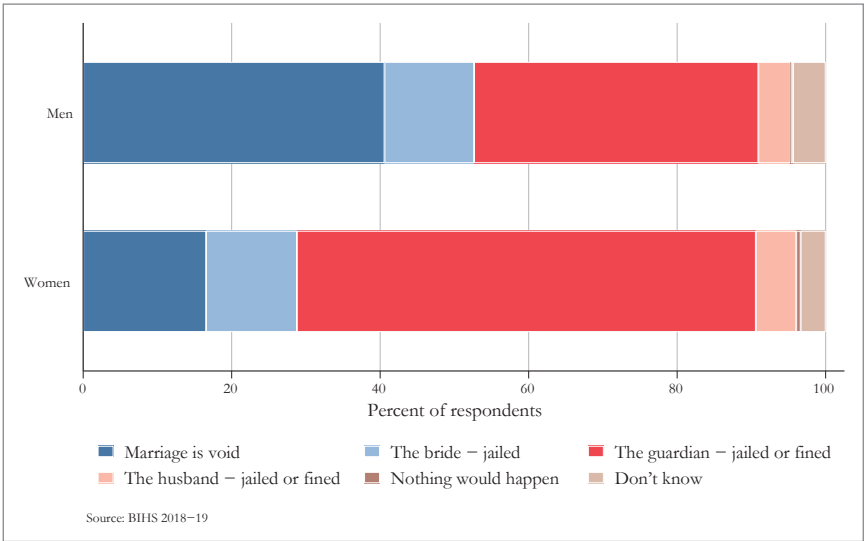


It is evident that both men and women are well-informed about the laws, with most respondents correctly identifying the legal age of marriage. This indicates the success of government and NGO initiatives in disseminating information and raising awareness on this issue. The widespread knowledge of the legal age demonstrates the effectiveness of educational campaigns and community outreach programs in promoting understanding of child marriage laws. These efforts have likely involved various methods, such as workshops, informational pamphlets, media campaigns, and collaboration with local leaders, to ensure the message reaches a broad audience.

To further investigate the awareness level, we observe the perception of the respondents about government's action if child marriage happens. The original question asked to the respondents during the survey was,

“If a girl is married before the legal minimum age of marriage, what type of actions can the government take?” Responses are exhibited in the following Figure 2-5. There is a noticeable difference in perceptions between men and women regarding child marriage. The majority of women believe that guardians are responsible and should be jailed if they arrange a child marriage. In contrast, most men think that such marriages will simply be void. This suggests that men perceive child marriage less as a criminal act, rather more as a contractual issue. Rest of the categories similar across gender.

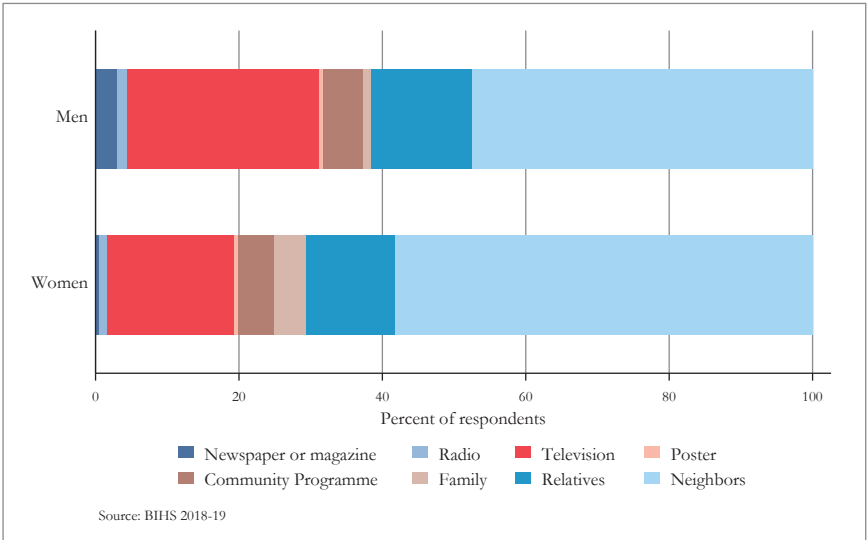
Figure 2-5. Perception about government’s action if child marriage happens



Lastly, we aimed to identify the sources from which individuals first learned about the legalities of child marriage. Respondents were asked the following question: “From which source did you first hear, see, watch, or read about the current law regarding the legal minimum age for marriage?” The responses are illustrated in Figure 2-6. The most common source of information for both men and women were their neighbours. Relatives were also frequently mentioned as a significant source of information.

This indicates that social networks play a crucial role in disseminating information about child marriage laws. The reliance on neighbours and relatives highlights the importance of community-based efforts in spreading awareness and educating the public about legal regulations.

Figure 2-6. Source of information about legal minimum age of marriage



2.4 Parental Motivations for Child Marriage

The following Table 2-1 focuses on the reasons of why girls under the age of 18 get married in Bangladesh, as reported rural women who are currently under the age of 31 and were married before 18. The data is sourced from BIHS 2018-19 (IFPRI, 2020) and divided based on whether these women are currently living with their husbands or have left the marriage due to separation, divorce, or death.

Table 2-1: Common reasons behind girls' early (U18) marriage, by marital status

Reasons	% of Respondents	
	Still married & living with husband	Returned permanently after separation, divorce or death of husband
Percentage of girls get married before 18	53.98%	59.39%
Reasons are –		
She was harassed by local boys/men	1.92%	0.36%
Out of fear of harassment by boys/men	3.47%	1.80%
Thought the groom was very good and they might not get such a good choice again	42.28%	42.60%
Marriage proposals were coming for her	20.00%	20.04%
The girl herself wanted to marry	6.23%	8.91%
If the girl gets more education, it will be difficult to find her equally or more educated groom	1.44%	0.36%
If the girl gets more education, then parents might have to pay higher dowry to find her a good match	0.24%	0.14%
If the girl gets older, then parents might have to pay higher dowry to find her a good match	2.51%	2.95%
Pressure from relatives	3.11%	3.81%
Pressure from neighbors	2.04%	1.58%
Economic condition was poor to support her (food, education, clothing etc.)	14.97%	15.30%

Source: BIHS 2018-19.

The primary reason for child marriage, regardless of marital status, was that the family believed the groom was a good match and they might not find someone as good again (around 42.0%). The second most common reason was that marriage proposals were coming for the girl (around 20.0%). The third most common reason was the poor economic condition of the family (around 15.0%). Note that the poor economic condition may interact with and contribute to others reasons behind the child marriage. Other factors included the girl's desire to marry, concerns about dowry and finding a suitable match if the girl continued her education, and pressure from relatives and neighbours. Sexual harassment by local boys/men was cited as a reason for child marriage by a small percentage of the respondents. Overall, the data suggests that child marriage decision marry is often driven by the social and economic considerations, with a focus on securing what is perceived to be a 'good marriage' for the girl.

A significant observation is that a comparable proportion of women from both the still married and separated groups were married before the age of 18, with percentages being 54.0% and 59.4% respectively. In rural areas, there exists a common belief that delaying marriage can lead to various marital issues and make it challenging to find a suitable match. However, this perception is evidently unfounded, as child marriages do not necessarily result in different outcomes.

2.5 Socio-demographic Information of Household

Again, using BIHS 2018-19 nationally rural representative sample, we have estimated the following Table 2-2, which provides a detailed socio-demographic analysis of currently married women and under the age of 31 during the survey round. The data specifically compares those who were married before the legal age of 18 (child marriage) with those who were married after 18 (adult marriage). The women are further categorized based on their current marital status: those who are still married and living with their husband and those who have returned to their natal family permanently due to separation, divorce, or widowhood.

Table 2-2: Socio-demographic information of currently married women, under the age of 31

Particulars	Still married & living with husband		Returned permanently after separation, divorce or death of husband	
	Married before 18	Married after 18	Married before 18	Married after 18
Bride's age	15.66	19.53	15.81	19.35
Age at menarche	12.60	12.74	12.73	12.86
Groom's age	23.51	25.99	22.84	25.61
Bride's current educational attainment (in years of schooling)	7.42	9.19	6.60	7.80
Bride's educational attainment at the time of her marriage (in years of schooling)	7.30	9.05	6.53	7.70
Groom's current educational attainment (in years of schooling)	7.01	8.35	5.61	6.66
Groom's educational attainment at the time of her marriage (in years of schooling)	7.09	8.31	5.63	6.67
Father's educational attainment (in years of schooling)	2.57	3.19	2.89	3.73
Mother's educational attainment (in years of schooling)	2.17	2.33	2.14	2.50
Number of brothers	1.57	1.86	1.78	1.87
Number of sisters	1.73	2.04	1.97	2.15
Dowry (amount in BDT)	64,390.65	85,564.25	53,683.75	70,483.02
Promised Mahr/Kabin (amount in BDT)	178,903.87	195,178.81	146,330.76	223,785.95
Mahr/Kabin paid at the time of marriage (amount in BDT)	29,643.33	36,126.06	19,662.29	32,874.35
Monthly household income	10,154.47	11,217.45	11,971.17	13,321.38

Source: BIHS 2018-19



The data indicates a noticeable difference in the average age of marriage between women married before 18 and those married after 18. The average ages for women married before 18 were 15.7 and 15.8 years, while those married after 18 had average ages of 19.5 and 19.4 years. This underscores the significantly low age at which child marriages occur, highlighting its prevalence in the former group. Additionally, the average age at menarche was slightly lower for those married before 18, suggesting that girls married younger may experience earlier physical maturation.

Educational attainment was significantly lower among brides married before 18, as well as their grooms and parents, indicating that child marriage often disrupts education and limits opportunities for personal and economic development. Child marriage is more prevalent in households with lower levels of parental education. Furthermore, dowry and promised Mahr/Kabin amounts were generally lower for brides married before 18, although the proportion paid at the time of marriage was higher, possibly reflecting the economic vulnerability of families marrying off their daughters at a young age. The monthly household income was considerably lower for families where the bride was married before 18, indicating a correlation between child marriage and lower socioeconomic status and limited economic opportunities.

The data presented in the table strongly suggests that child marriage in Bangladesh is associated with a range of negative consequences for women. These include lower educational attainment, earlier childbearing, reduced economic opportunities, and increased vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion. The findings highlight the urgent need for continued efforts to prevent child marriage and support girls and women in achieving their full potential.

This section of the research report focuses on child marriage in Bangladesh, analyzing trends, parental perceptions, and socio-demographic characteristics. Findings indicate a strong positive relationship between child marriage and early childbirth, with a 79.6% correlation. Data reveals increasing rates of child marriage, especially in rural areas, with a rise from 4.2% to 8.2% for marriages before the age of 15 and from

30.0% to 41.6% for marriages before 18. While awareness of the legal minimum age for marriage is high, perceptions of government action differ between genders. The primary reasons for child marriage are the perceived suitability of the groom, the presence of marriage proposals, and poor economic conditions. Socio-demographic analysis shows that child marriage is associated with lower educational attainment, earlier childbearing, reduced economic opportunities, and increased vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion.

3 Study Aim and Objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the national trend and explore parental and girls' perceptions regarding child marriage. Thus, gaining a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. This study also aims to assess the role of a Bangladesh based NGO, Nijera Kori, to support rural individuals and community in asserting their agency to navigate child marriage. The specific objectives of this study are:

1. Analyzing the trends and patterns of child marriage in rural Bangladesh using nationally representative sample surveys.
2. Examining the factors of child marriage to understand how families and communities are exercising their agency to prevent it.
3. Assessing the impacts of different programmes of Nijera Kori in building awareness and asserting agency to prevent child marriage in rural Bangladesh.

4 Methodology

This study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative methods to present and understand the trends, patterns and factors of child marriage. To analyze the trends and patterns, this study uses a quantitative method relying on the open access microdata from various nationwide representative sample surveys. To understand and analyze the patterns and factors of child marriage and the role of Nijera Kori in preventing child marriage, this study mainly employs feminist approaches of qualitative method.

4.1 National Representative Sample Surveys

We have used three different national sample surveys in this study. First, we use data from multiple rounds of the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (SVRS) survey. This is an initiative by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) aimed at producing accurate and up-to-date demographic data. This system monitors vital events including births, deaths, marriages, and migrations. It provides crucial indicators such as the Annual Natural Growth Rate (NGR), Crude Birth Rate (CBR), Crude Death Rate (CDR), Total Fertility Rate (TFR), Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), Under-Five Mortality Rate (U5MR), and Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR).

Second, we use Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS 2018-19). The BIHS 2018-2019 is the third round of this comprehensive, nationally representative survey. Conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), BIHS collects detailed data on various aspects such as plot-level agricultural production, dietary intake of household members, anthropometric measurements (height and weight), and women's empowerment in agriculture through the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). The survey covers 5,604 households across 325 primary sampling units, providing statistically representative data for rural Bangladesh and each of the seven administrative divisions: Barisal, Chittagong, Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Sylhet.

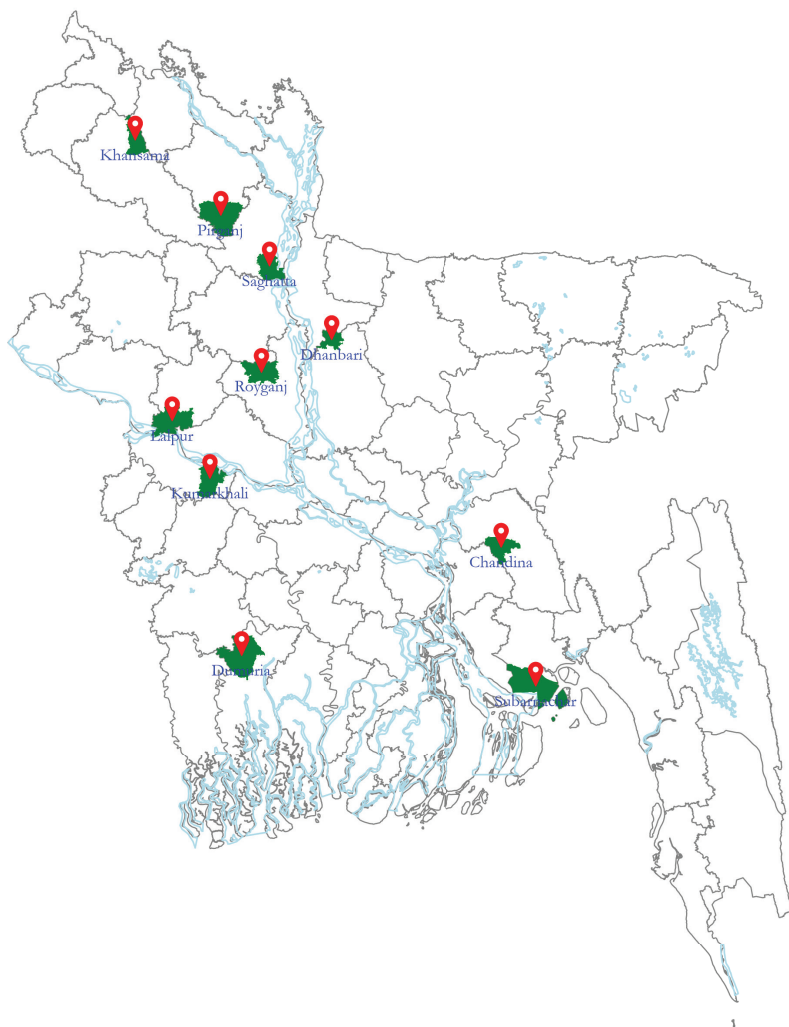
Third, we use the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2019 in Bangladesh that was conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in collaboration with UNICEF Bangladesh. This survey is part of the Global MICS Programme, which aims to collect internationally comparable data on various indicators related to the well-being of children and women. The survey collected data from 61,242 households across all 64 districts in Bangladesh, providing a comprehensive overview of the country's progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

4.2 Qualitative Study Location

The qualitative part of this study was conducted between September to December, 2024 in different working areas (mainly rural) of Nijera Kori.

For selecting the areas, we employed a purposive sampling based on the prevalence of child marriage (high and low); rates of poverty (high and low); and rates of educational attainment (high and low); and the access to the non-members families.

Figure 4-1. Study location



A brief design of the study and number of research activities are presented in the following Table 4-1. Here, member households mean household who participates in the Nijera Kori's program. Household interviews were conducted separately at their premise. Both parents and girl child were interviewed. Whereas, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted at Nijera Kori's establishment.

Table 4-1: Number of participants, by area, by type of survey

SL	District	Upazila	Interviews			FGDs	
			Non-member HH	Member HH	Early-married Couples	Adult	Adolescent
1	Cumilla	Chandina	2	2	-	1	1
2	Noakhali	Subarnachar	2	2	-	1	1
3	Khulna	Dumuria	3	2	-	1	1
4	Kushtia	Kumarkhali	2	2	1	1	1
5	Tangail	Dhanbari	3	2	-	1	1
6	Sirajganj	Royganj	3	2	-	1	1
7	Rangpur	Pirganj	2	2	-	1	1
8	Gaibandha	Saghatta	1	1	-	1	1
9	Dinajpur	Khansama	3	2	-	1	1
10	Natore	Lalpur	2	2	2	1	1
Total	10	10	23	19	3	10	10

4.3 Qualitative Study Design

This study used a combination of FGDs with the adult members (6-10) and adolescent members (6-10) of Nijera Kori and the semi-structured interviews with the families (both member and non-member of Nijera Kori) who have lived experiences of child marriage and those who prevented it. This study also interviewed three under-aged married couples (both the bride and groom were under-aged) to better understand the causes and consequences of child marriage from their realities.

Altogether, the research team prepared five interview schedules tailored to each participant group (adult members, member families, non-member

families, adolescent members, and early-married couples). The interview (FGD) questions for the adult members of Nijera Kori focused primarily on six themes: patterns and factors of child marriage in their working areas; different programs of Nijera Kori and their impacts in preventing child marriage; Nijera Kori in building agency among the members and non-member families; knowledge and awareness of gendered social norms associated with child marriage; challenges in preventing child marriage; and policy recommendations to end child marriage and harmful social norms. The interview (FGD) questions for adolescent group of Nijera Kori focused primarily on seven themes: adolescent awareness on the causes and consequences of child marriage; adolescent knowledge of the sexual and reproductive health; gender norms and child marriage; intimate relations, access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and child marriage; adolescent aspiration and child marriage; role of Nijera Kori in building agency among young people; role of adolescent group in preventing child marriage.

The interview questions for member and non-member families were focused on three themes: perception of child marriage; lived realities (causes and consequences) of child marriage; potential prevention strategies. The interview questions for the early-married couples were focused on three themes: perception of child marriage; reasons behind child marriage; post-marriage experiences of schooling, housework, care work and paid work.

Using both FGDs and interviews, this study centers participants' voices to comprehend the patterns, factors, and consequences of child marriage in recent years. The interview recordings were listened carefully and the transcription was done by the research team following a mix verbatim and creative translation. However, some of the participants were hesitant in recording the conversation and their stories were noted down by the Principal Investigator. The FGDs, interview data and the field notes are analyzed thematically to understand the current context and picture of child marriage in rural Bangladesh.



4.4 Ethical Issues

This study follows the practices of ‘feminist research ethics’ and the ‘ethical guidelines of conducting research on child marriage’ prepared by Save the Children. In line with that, participants’ consent, privacy, and their safety were the first and foremost priority of this research project. Before starting the interviews and FGDs, the research team explained the explanatory statement and consent form to the concerned officials of Nijera Kori. In each study area, the concerned officials recruited the participants who consented to take part in this study. For the adolescent FGDs, consent was taken from the parents of the young girls and boys. During the interviews, the explanatory statement and the consent form was again explained to the participants in colloquial language by the research team. The research team also gave a content warning (in plain and colloquial language) before starting each interview and FGDs. Particularly, the team was very careful and vigilant in asking personal and sensitive questions while conducting the FGDs with the adolescent group of Nijera Kori and the early-married couples.

5 Findings and Discussion

In this section, we will discuss the key findings of this study focusing on the causes and factors behind child marriage in rural Bangladesh. This findings section will also discuss the impact of Nijera Kori and its various programmes in preventing child marriage, in asserting agency, and building awareness on various gender and human rights issues.

5.1 Recent Trends and Patterns

On the contrary to the historical trend from the national representative sample survey, qualitative findings of this study indicate a decline in child marriage rates in the past 15 years in the study locations. As discussed by the participants, this declining trend is the result of different awareness programs of both the government and non-government organizations in their areas. The participants shared that rural citizens are more aware of the consequences of child marriage, particularly the maternal and child

health related impacts. In their discussion, the adult members of Nijera Kori emphasized the impact of access to ICT in building awareness and legal knowledge in the rural areas. The findings underscore the favorable effects of Nijera Kori's initiative in addressing the issue of child marriage. Particularly, social change has been highlighted by the adult members of Nijera Kori in their discussion:

These days, parents are increasingly reluctant to marry off their daughters at a young age. They are more aware of the health risks child marriage poses, not only to their daughters but also to the future well-being of their grandchildren. There is also a deep concern that early marriage will disrupt the girls' education, cutting off their chance at a better future.

However, the members shared that despite legal restrictions and awareness campaigns, some families continue to arrange child marriage in secret, often outside of their locality at a relative's place to avoid detection. One respondent shared:

Sometimes, we complain to the concerned authorities when we know child marriage is about to happen in our locality, and we provide them with the address. But if, somehow, the parents find out that the authorities are coming to visit their house soon, they will change the location or the date of the marriage. They do this discreetly, so when the authorities arrive, they do not find any evidence of the child marriage taking place. Then, on a later date, the families arrange the marriage secretly in their relative's house outside of our locality.

Our participants further shared that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a temporary resurgence of the child marriage practice. The FGDs with the adult members of Nijera Kori suggest that the financial hardship caused by the pandemic, along with school closures and disruptions to everyday life, has particularly increased the vulnerability of the girl child. Families experiencing financial hardship resorted to child marriage as a coping mechanism, often to reduce the number of mouths to feed or to secure financial support through dowries (Greene & Stiefvater, 2019).

Interestingly, child marriage is not limited to girls; boys also experience it due to recently created employment opportunities in some areas. We found that in the Northern region of Bangladesh, young boys are employed as the factory workers or auto rickshaw puller. This early employment can lead to child marriage as the families may consider child marriage as a way to secure financial stability or to conform to gendered expectations of fulfilling familial responsibilities through marriage (Edmeades et al., 2022).

Another recent trend is the increased engagement of young people in romantic relationships, facilitated by the widespread availability of communication technologies and platforms, which in turn has contributed to incidences of elopement and child marriage. Our study found that when young girls and boys are in love affairs, they may feel pressured to marry quickly, often without the consent or knowledge of their parents. This is particularly common in rural areas as the young unmarried couples face significant social and familial barriers to personal time and intimacy. This can result in elopement, where the couples run away to get married. Our findings suggest that these marriages are often registered either by bribing the lawyers or following the religious norms. One participant shared:

I know it is not legal, but they try to bribe the lawyers and their assistants to arrange the marriage. For instance, some people offer ten thousand takas to the lawyers when the official marriage registration fees are lower than that. Then, if anyone questions the age, they say the marriage has already been legally registered in the court. Once it's done in court, there are no further issues. In court, lawyers and their assistants are often involved in the process, but they don't provide any official documents, so if any problems arise later, the family cannot file a case.

Another participant shared the process of child marriage which are done by following the religious norms:

Marriage without a Kabin means that it is completed only through religious rites. According to the religious leaders, who perform these ceremonies, the Kabin is just a government requirement. They conduct the marriage solely according to religious norms. In child marriages, the Kabin or official registration is not possible because the bride or groom often lacks the necessary documents. To justify this, the religious leaders claim that a marriage without a Kabin is valid and promise to complete the registration once the bride and groom are of legal age.

The above quote highlights that marriage without official registration is a common practice among the younger generation who are getting married without parental consent. This pattern of marriage without registration is also found very common in Dhanbari (Tangail district) area. Our respondents emphasized that unregistered marriages affect the legal status of the married couples. In many cases, since the marriage is not registered, the girl cannot ask for a divorce or claim the ‘Mahr’ (dower according to Islamic marriage practice). Although unregistered marriages have long existed in rural Bangladesh, our respondents indicated that the rise in child marriage among young couples has further amplified this harmful practice. As a result, the existing laws cannot effectively criminalize child marriage. To effectively address the issue of child marriage in the current context, it is essential to understand the underlying causes and the contributing factors. Drawing on the interviews and FGDs, the next section discusses the factors associated with child marriage in rural Bangladesh.

5.2 Factors Associated with Child Marriage

This section discusses the key factors associated with child marriage in rural Bangladesh. The qualitative findings of this study suggests that child marriage is complex issue that cannot be attributed to a single cause, but rather a web of interconnected factors (Hanmer & Elefante, 2016; Parsons & McCleary-Sills, 2014). As evidenced in our analysis, traditional gender norms remain the dominant driving force behind child marriage in rural Bangladesh (Naved et al., 2017; Yount et al., 2016). However, a new trend of elopement and child marriage has emerged with the increased access to ICT and this trend has been repeatedly highlighted in their discussion

by the adult and adolescent members of Nijera Kori. Other broad factors of child marriage include: families' financial hardship, lack of parental and adolescent awareness, persuasion by the local matchmakers, birth certificate falsification by the local government authorities, and the religious beliefs and practices in rural areas. As mentioned earlier, these factors intersect and reinforce one another, perpetuating the practice of child marriage.

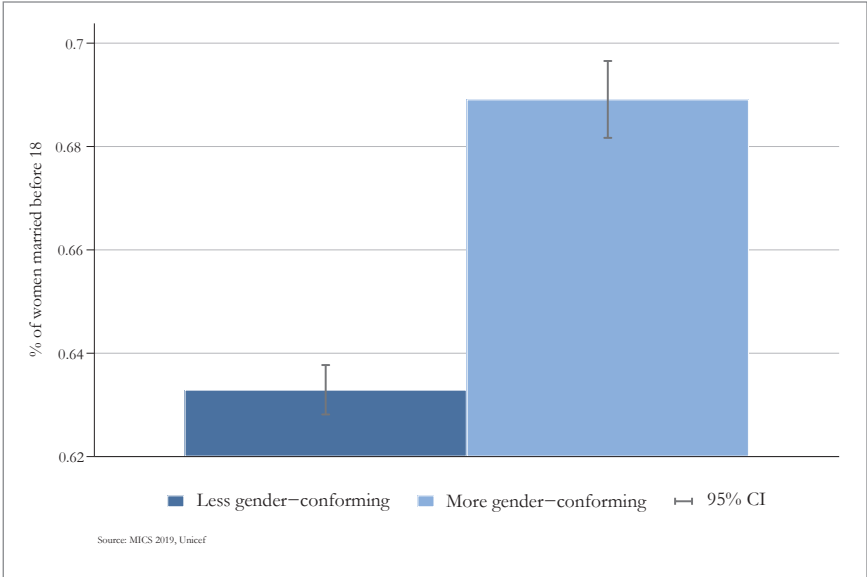
5.2.1 Traditional Gender Norms and Child Marriage

The findings of our research support the earlier studies that traditional gender norms continue to play a dominant role in perpetuating and reinforcing the child marriage practice in rural Bangladesh. Despite various efforts and intervention of government and NGOs, these entrenched gender norms remain a significant barrier to eradicating child marriage. In MICS 2019 data, there were five dichotomous questions related to traditional gender norm. Such as, "Is it justified for a husband to beat his wife if she neglects their children?" or "Is it justified for a husband to beat his wife if she argues with him?". We recreated a new 'gender-conforming' variable that takes value of '1' if any women answer 'yes' to any of these five questions, and '0' otherwise. Then we compare mean percentage of child marriage over this 'gender-conforming' variable. Result is exhibited in [Figure 5-1](#). This figure confirm that child marriage is more prevalent in households that conform more strongly to traditional gender norms. These mean differences are statistically significant as indicated by the



95.0% confidence interval bars. Note that this relationship is not causal, but confirms common understanding about the relationship between gender norms and child marriage.

Figure 5-1. Gender norms and child marriage



These norms are often rooted in gendered myth that dictate women’s traditional role in society, emphasizing ‘marriage’ and ‘motherhood’ over educational attainment, paid employment and personal development. One such myth is the belief that a girl’s ‘beauty’ and ‘value’ are closely tied to her ‘youth’, leading families to marry off their daughters before or immediately after they reach their puberty (Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Rozario, 2020). One participant shared their opinion in this regard:

In our society, there is a prevailing belief that educated girls are past the ideal age for marriage and have lost their youthful beauty. As a result, families often seek younger, under aged girls for marriage.

Another gendered myth prevalent in rural Bangladesh is that certain health problems faced by the adolescent girls can be resolved through marriage and childbirth (Alam et al., 2024). For example, many girls in Pakerhat

area suffer from leukorrhea and menstrual pain in adolescence and it is widely believed in that area that marriage will solve those health issues. One of the adolescent girls shared their lived experience of leukorrhea and the resulted marital pressure from families and community:

In our area, many girls also suffer from leukorrhea and painful menstruation. Their mothers believe that marriage will solve these problems. They assume no medical treatment is necessary, only marriage can cure it. I myself had leukorrhea, and despite taking many medications, I haven't recovered. Now my mother is saying she will arrange my marriage when I reach class ten because she has seen some of my aunts recover from leukorrhea after marriage. The neighbours also encourage my mother to arrange marriages as early as possible.

In their discussion, the participants shared that parents are more aware of the legal age of marriage and the negative health consequences of child marriage. Despite increasing awareness among the parents, families are often compelled to marry off their daughters at an early age to avoid social scrutiny and negative comments. In the rural areas, when the girls reach puberty or begin to 'grow physically' in adolescence, they experience increased attention and gossip, leading to a sense of urgency among parents to arrange a child marriage (Efevbera et al., 2017). This dynamic was described by one respondent in Kumarkhali area:

When a girl starts growing taller during adolescence, neighbours often label her as a "grown woman" despite her being just a teenager. They start to gossip and begin pressuring her parents to arrange the marriage as soon as possible, ignoring her age and readiness for marriage.

In the rural areas, families also feel pressured to marry off their daughters at an early age to avoid social stigma attached to sexual harassment (Nahar et al., 2013). Our FGD participants discussed that when a girl experiences sexual harassment, she often faces severe stigma and labelling from her community. To avoid this 'social disgrace' and to 'protect' the girl from further harassment, families resort to child marriage. This response is driven by the gendered belief that marriage will restore the girl's 'honour' and her family's dignity (Akter et al., 2022). One of the FGD participants' statement:

When girls step outside of their homes—say, on their way to school—they are often subjected to harassment from local boys. What is frustrating is that the harassers are rarely held accountable. Instead, people shift the blame onto the girls. You will hear comments like, “The daughter of X family has been harassed on the road,” as if it is the girl’s fault. When families hear such things repeatedly, they start thinking it is better to marry off their daughters to protect their honour and preserve the family’s dignity.

While discussing this topic, majority of the participants emphasized that this experience is particularly common for the young girls from lower income families (Feldman, 2001; Kabeer, 2024). When the research team asked them about the reason, the respondents replied: “girls from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are often less able to speak up about sexual harassment and the harasser are aware of that. Legal practices in our society also place more pressure on girls from poor families.” In fact, majority of the respondents highlighted that traditional gender norms disproportionately impact the girls from poor families, exacerbating their vulnerability to practices like child marriage. This vulnerability further intensified if the girls are engaged in romantic relationship at a young age (Jones et al., 2020). Because, girls experience stigma and social scrutiny if they are perceived to be in a romantic relationship outside of marriage. As a result, families arrange child marriages to ‘protect’ their daughters’ reputations and thus adhere to gendered cultural norms. This phenomenon was described as:

In many families, particularly among the poor, where preserving family honour is paramount, parents often feel compelled to arrange child marriages if they suspect their children are involved in romantic relationships. To them, child marriage is the only way for these families to safeguard their reputation and moral standing within the community.

When we asked if this is the case only for the girls from poor families, respondents replied that this is equally applicable for the girls from religiously conservative middle-class families. We further wanted to know

if this gender dynamic of romantic relationship and child marriage is equally applicable for the young boys. The respondents answered:

The concern for maintaining social respect and reputation applies equally. Whenever community members observe young children engaging in romantic relationship, they inform the parents. In such situations, parents feel obligated to arrange marriages for their children, be it a boy or a girl, believing that it would protect their social standing within the community. Additionally, when boys and girls are in romantic relationships, the village councils (shalish) often arrange their marriages forcefully. But we must say, in these cases, girls experience harsher community judgement than the boys.

The above quote highlights how the social pressure to maintain the families' honour drives parents to arrange child marriage, believing that marriage will legitimize the relationship and prevent any potential disgrace to the families. Additionally, village councils (shalish) often intervene in such situations, arranging child marriage forcefully for the young couples. The quote further emphasizes that girls experience punitive community judgment than boys in these cases. This disparity is rooted in deeply ingrained gender norms of patriarchal Bangladeshi society that place a higher value on 'female chastity' and 'virtue' (Chowdhury, 2004). It is clear from the above statement that girls are often subjected to stricter scrutiny and are more likely to be blamed for engaging in romantic relationships, leading to greater social pressure and stigma. Consequently, the practice of child marriage is often considered as a means to control and protect girls' reputations.

In their discussion, the participants of this study identified traditional gender norms as the root cause of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. It was interesting to learn that despite increased parental awareness of the harms of child marriage, when parents find a 'suitable' groom, they still prefer to marry off their daughters. As discussed by the participants, this practice is deeply rooted to the traditional gender norms where marriage is considered as an 'inevitable' milestone and as a means of economic security for girls (Efevbera & Bhabha, 2020). One respondent clearly explained it:

When parents find a ‘good match’ for their daughter, a man who is economically stable, they believe it would be the best for their daughter to marry off. For them, the man’s educational background doesn’t matter, only his financial status that matters. If he has a job or stable income, that’s all they care about. When the groom comes from a financially stable family – girls’ parents think, we’ll have to marry off our daughter eventually, even if it’s a year later. They don’t want to miss out on a good match, so they marry off under aged daughter.

From the above quote, it is evident that marrying off a daughter to an economically stable groom is perceived as way to ensure her economic and social security. This belief is also rooted in the gendered cultural expectations that a man will be the primary breadwinner and the protector of the families, while a woman’s role is confined to ‘wives’ and ‘mothers’. Overall, the discussion in this sub-section evidenced that Bangladeshi societies deeply entrenched patriarchal norms are the primary driver of child marriage in rural areas. Despite increased awareness and efforts to prevent child marriage, gendered myth, traditional gender roles and gendered social expectations continues to perpetuate this harmful practice. Therefore, intervention programs targeted to challenge the patriarchal norms is essential to address the issue of child marriage.

5.2.2 ICT Access, Romantic Relationship and Child Marriage

In recent years, the widespread availability of smartphones and internet connectivity in rural areas has exposed young girls and boys to early romantic relationships, elopement and child marriage without parental consent. Majority of our participants shared that while digital connectivity has the potential to provide significant economic and educational opportunities to the young people, irresponsible and unsafe use of ICT contributes to the perpetuation of child marriage practice among this generation. This important to mention that while our analysis identified gender norms as the primary reason for child marriage, in the FGDs and interviews, both the adult and adolescent respondents highlighted how the younger generations’ unsafe use of ICT is causing for child marriage in recent years. Our findings suggest that this trend of child marriage is a post-COVID phenomenon. One respondent expressed their concern:

While it is true that parents are more aware and supportive of their daughters' education and are against child marriage, a new concern has emerged—the behaviour of the children themselves. These changes have brought about an increase in unbalanced and hasty marriages. Some children have fallen into harmful habits, such as drug addiction, exposure to pornography, and other illicit activities. In this region specifically, parents are apprehensive about the role of mobile phones. These devices have become a gateway for immature romantic relationships among adolescents, which often culminate in child marriages. Managing this growing influence of technology has become a primary challenge for parents today. In some cases, when parents resist these early marriage demands, adolescent couples elope, choosing to marry without parental consent. Fearful of public judgment and societal criticism, parents often feel forced to arrange these marriages to protect their family's reputation.

The participants also discussed the link between adolescent curiosity and child marriage with particular reference to communication technologies (Nisa, 2024). In the digital age, adolescent curiosity lead to their exposure to pornographic content, which has significant implications for child marriage (Manning, 2006; Smith, 2013). Firstly, in Bangladesh, access to comprehensive sexual education is restricted by the social and religious norms. As a result, adolescent turn to the internet to satisfy their curiosity about intimate relationships. As discussed by the participants, this exposure to pornographic videos is creating premature sexual desires and behaviours among the young girls and boys in their locality. When young couples experience curiosity about sexual relationships, they often find themselves at odds with societal values that discourage premarital intimacy (Jamieson, 2005). In Bangladeshi cultures, traditional norms and values place a high emphasis on chastity and moral conduct, particularly for young girls. This creates a conflict for adolescents who are in romantic relationships but are constrained by societal expectations. In this context, marriage is often seen as the solution to reconcile their desires with societal norms. By getting married, young couples can legitimize their relationship and engage in sexual activity without facing social stigma or judgment (Muniruzzaman, 2017). This perceived solution is driven

by the belief that marriage provides a socially acceptable framework for intimacy, protecting the couple's reputation and aligning with cultural values. Excerpt from our FGDs with the adult members of Chandina:

While mobile phones offer many benefits, they also expose young boys and girls to inappropriate content. Unlike previous generations, some young boys and girls now become involved in physical relationships after being influenced by what they watch on internet. Additionally, smartphones give access to pornographic content, which can create sexual desires at a young age. But this is not acceptable in our culture. So, the young and emotional couples do not have a choice other than child marriage.

This study found that in majority cases, young couples elope and arrange the marriage in the court by bribing the lawyers. However, in some cases, when parents discover their children's romantic relationship, they often feel compelled to arrange child marriage to avoid any potential social stigma attached to romantic relationship. Another alarming trend was shared by majority of the adolescent members of Nijera Kori:

Often, boys blackmail girls as they shared different private photos and videos. This happens due to their involvement in love affairs through online platforms where both exhibit interest in sexual behaviour and share private photos. Finding no other way, the girl gets scared of her reputation. Eventually, she chooses to marry early to avoid any future repercussions or damage to her reputation. Either she agreed to marry her boyfriend, or she pressurised her parents for marriage just to protect her honour.

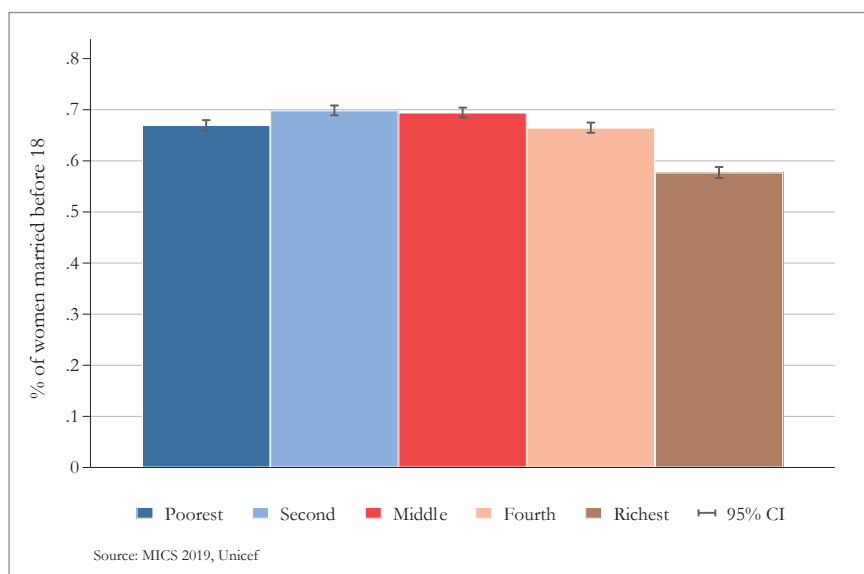
The above quote highlights the intersection of digital exploitation, gender norms, and child marriage. In the context of online love affairs, adolescents often engage in sharing private photos and videos, driven by curiosity and the desire for intimacy (Klose & Jebin, 2024). However, this digital exchange can lead to blackmail, where boys use these private materials to coerce girls into maintaining the relationship. The fear of reputational damage and societal judgment compels girls to seek child marriage as a means of escaping the blackmail and preserving their 'honour'. This

decision is influenced by deeply ingrained gender norms that place a high value on female chastity and reputation. This dynamic and our FGDs with the adolescent members underscores the need for comprehensive digital literacy education, legal protections against online exploitation, and efforts to challenge harmful gender norms that perpetuate child marriage. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that empowers both the young girls and boys to navigate digital spaces safely.

5.2.3 Financial Hardship and Child Marriage

In earlier studies, poverty has been identified as a significant driver of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. This relationship is also evident in MICS 2019 survey. The following Figure 5-2 shows the average child marriage rate over income quartiles. Clearly, child marriage is less common in the richest quartile compared to the poorest quartile. These mean differences are statistically significant as indicated by the 95.0% confidence interval bars.

Figure 5-2. Child marriage by rural wealth index quartile



The qualitative findings of this study further confirm that families experiencing financial hardship often consider child marriage as a

strategy to reduce the financial burden of raising a child and bearing their educational expenses, particularly for the girl child. Our findings also indicate that these economic pressures are compounded by the gender norms that prioritize marriage over education and paid employment, particularly for the girls from lower income families (Fattah & Camellia, 2022; Kamal et al., 2015). This scenario is well explained by one of the adult members of Nijera Kori from Jahangirabad area:

Coming from the poorest neighbourhood, I have witnessed several additional factors fuelling child marriage. In these villages, many children from impoverished families are married off due to financial hardship. Child marriage is particularly prevalent among girls, especially within low-income families. For poor families, it is hard to support their daughters' education up to the intermediate level. It is not just about the cost of education—it is also difficult to provide food and basic needs for all their children. Some families have five or more children, and feeding so many mouths is a big challenge. The misconception among these families that daughters represent an additional financial burden often drives this practice. With more children to support, these families often resort to early marriages as a means to alleviate the financial burden of meeting their basic needs.

It is clear from the above quote that among the lower income families, child marriage often functions as a form of economic security. Another significant reason for girl child's marriage among the lower-income families is the economic incentive tied to dowries. Our participants shared that in rural areas, the younger the bride, the lower the dowry demand. Poor families, facing financial constraints, often consider child marriage to reduce the economic burden of a hefty dowry. This practice is driven by the belief that marrying off a younger girl requires smaller financial exchange, making it more feasible for families with limited resources. However, it was interesting to know that there has been a significant shift in the attitudes of poor parents towards child marriage. As emphasized by the respondents, many parents now recognize the importance of education and aspire to higher education and paid employment for their daughters. However, the financial burden of educational expenses and associated

costs remains a significant barrier. For families struggling to make ends meet, the cost of school fees, uniforms, books, and transportation are overwhelming. This economic hardship often forces poor parents to consider child marriage as a more viable option, despite their desire to educate their daughters. This reality was shared by one respondent in Chandina area:

There are also poor families where the parents are more aware and make an effort to educate their daughters. They believe that if their daughter is educated, she will be established in the future and will be able to take care of them when needed. But they cannot afford the educational expenses. Sending a girl to school also involves additional expenses, like new clothes and school supplies, which makes educating a girl costlier than a boy. This discourages parents from investing in their daughters' education even though they dream about educating their daughters.

This is important to mention that our individual interviews with the member and non-member families echoed with this finding. Majority of the families who experienced child marriage shared their aspiration of educating their daughters and the dream of securing paid employment, recognizing the long-term benefit of education and women's economic independence. However, the financial burden of educational expenses forced them to resort to child marriage as a means of economic relief. These families also urged for government support to alleviate poor families' financial barriers to girls' education. Connected to this, the research team asked them about the Female Stipend Program of Bangladesh Government and the families shared that they were excluded from this support due to nepotism and corruption of the school authorities. As described by the families, these officials manipulate the selection process to favour students, often those with connections or local influence, rather than those most in need. These families have further expressed that, with adequate financial assistance from the government, they would readily invest in higher education for their daughters rather than considering child marriage. This underscores the critical role that targeted financial aid, more stipends for poor girls, and community support programs can play significant role in eradicating child marriage.

5.2.4 Parental and Adolescents' Lack of Awareness and Child Marriage

Illiteracy among parents and the resulted lack of awareness was identified as a critical factor contributing to child marriage in rural areas. As discussed in the FGDs, even though there has been a significant change in parental attitude and level of awareness about child marriage, there are still many families unaware of the long-term consequences of child marriage. One respondents' comment:

Illiteracy is another critical factor contributing to the prevalence of child marriage. Families in which both parents are illiterate are more susceptible to this practice, as they often lack awareness of the long-term consequences of child marriage and the importance of educating their daughters. Education fosters a better understanding of children's rights, health, and future opportunities, encouraging parents to prioritise their daughters' well-being and delay marriage until maturity.

Our findings further suggest that in some families, parents are aware of the consequences of child marriage, but the adolescents lack knowledge about the long-term impact of child marriage on their education, career prospects, and overall well-being. This is particularly true for the adolescent couples involved in romantic relationships. Two of the member families shared how they were emotionally pressurized by their children into arrange the marriages. One of the women members of Nijera Kori shared the experience of her daughter's marriage:



These children are too young to comprehend the weight of their decisions. They do not yet grasp how child marriage will shape their future — the impact on their education, their careers, and the immense responsibility of raising children and managing a household. Their innocence blinds them to the long-term challenges that lie ahead. Previously, parents were unaware, but now it is the young people. Drawn into immature relationships, they leave their parents with little choice but to arrange marriages, fearing the loss of their family's reputation in the eyes of the society. I wanted my daughter to be educated and employed, but she wanted to get married early. I did not agree with her decision and she started blackmailing me by refusing food for three days. What else I could do in that situation! In our locality, many parents are now being emotionally blackmailed by their children. Even the adolescents who are in romantic relationships threaten their parents that will commit suicide if parents do not arrange their marriage.

According to the respondents, addressing this issue requires comprehensive educational programs that inform young people about the sexual and reproductive health related consequences of child marriage and the educational and career related benefits of delaying marriage until a more mature age. The respondents further suggest that fostering a positive parent-child relationship can be a powerful tool to raise awareness among the adolescent girls and boys. As emphasized in the FGDs, when parents maintain open, trusting, and supportive communication with their children, they are better able to understand their needs, aspirations, and concerns. This mutual understanding helps parents guide their children through adolescence, addressing their sexual curiosities and fears without resorting to child marriage as a solution. Thus, strong relationships will empower children to voice their thoughts and seek parental support, reducing the likelihood of elopement or coerced marriages. By prioritizing emotional connection and open dialogue, families can create a nurturing environment that supports the well-being and future aspirations of their children, thereby mitigating the pressures that lead to child marriage.

5.2.5 Religious Factors and Child Marriage

In their discussions, majority of the adult members of Nijera Kori indicated religious fundamentalism and misinterpretation of religious texts as a contributing factor behind child marriage in their localities. They shared that some of the local religious leaders emphasize the importance of child marriage either by quoting or interpreting the religious texts. The members discussed how those interpretations present child marriage as a ‘religious duty’ of the parents. Traditional gender norms often intersect with these religious norms and interpretations and creates a reinforcing cycle of child marriage (Biswas et al., 2019; Rahman, 2017). An excerpt from our adult FGDs:

Respondent 4: Another reason for child marriage in our society is religious fundamentalism. We have seen that some local religious leaders encourage families to marry off their girl child at ages as young as 12 or 13. They argue that our religion permits marriage at this age. According to those religious leaders, a girl child is considered ready for marriage as soon as their genital hair becomes visible or their menstruation starts. They preach that, at this point, marriage becomes a moral and religious obligation of the parents — any delay would render the child vulnerable to sin.

Interviewer: When and where do they give such message?

Respondent 3: They give these messages during religious gatherings, commonly known as Talims, but some maulanas (religious leaders) also do this while moving through the villages. For example, if they see a young girl on the road, they might ask for her parents’ names and find her father to persuade him to marry her off as soon as possible. He repeatedly pressured the father, even though the girl was only in eighth grade, and eventually suggested child marriage. This ideology exerts considerable pressure on families, further normalising child marriages.

The respondents further mentioned that in most of the cases, the religious leaders emphasize child marriage in a subtle way either during the post-prayer discussions on Fridays or during the religious and social gatherings:

Respondent 1: The Maulanas do not say this outright. Instead, they emphasise the responsibilities of parents, subtly influencing them toward arranging child marriages. They employ specific rhetorical techniques to persuade their audience without making direct statements during the weekly prayers on Friday. During post-prayer discussions, allowing them to spread gradually through interpersonal communication, eventually becoming ingrained as a societal norm.

Another respondent shared that in the religious gatherings, child marriages and other harmful gender norms are promoted in the name of parents' 'religious duty':

While Waj-mehfils (local religious gatherings), maulanas do not explicitly advocate for child marriage, because they are aware of the laws. They encourage a conservative outlook on women's roles, reinforcing traditional gendered expectations.

It was interesting to learn about a recent phenomenon that several YouTube videos of religious influencers reinforce unequal gender norms and encourage child marriage: *"in recent years, the fundamentalists are disseminating their ideas on their YouTube channels. Many people have now smart phone and internet access, but they are misusing it to promote harmful gender norms"*. Another emerging trend was the rise of religious educational institutions (for example, Qawmi Madrassas) which are restricting women's empowerment in the name of religious teaching. Between 1991-2000, there has been a rise of Qawmi Madrasas (Mamun & Shaon, 2018). As of 2022, there were 19,199 Qawmi Madrasas in Bangladesh where 2.75 million students are enrolled (UNB, 2022). As evidenced in our study, many poor students enrol in these religious educational institutions due to financial constraints and lack of access to formal education. Our participants shared that the curriculum and teaching in many of these institutions promote conservative gender ideologies and thus reinforce patriarchal values. This trend was well explained by one of the adult members of Nijera Kori:

Even though guardians are more conscious about child marriage today, specific informal educational setups are contributing to the problem. Recently, the rise of Quami Madrasas has further propagated conservative ideologies regarding women's empowerment. Interestingly, while low-income families are confined to this religious education, the Maulanas' children receive a regular, comprehensive education. This discrepancy reflects a broader issue: low-income families, deeply influenced by their religious beliefs, often fear going against religious authorities. Fundamentalists exploit this fear, pressuring these families to conform to rigid religious practices. As a result, families with limited resources feel compelled to follow these demands, further limiting their children's educational opportunities and reinforcing existing social inequalities.

The above quote sheds light on how religious schooling and socio-economic factors intertwine to perpetuate child marriage and gender inequality in rural Bangladesh. While there is a growing awareness among the rural parents about the detrimental effects of child marriage, this positive change is being undermined by some of the religious educational institutions. As evidenced in the above quote, low-income families often fear challenging religious schooling and this fear is exploited by the fundamentalists to promote child marriage and other unequal gender norms.

5.2.6 Local Government Authorities and Child Marriage

Another concerning factor was highlighted in our FGDs as the role of local union Parishad chairman and members in falsification birth certificates and thus facilitating child marriage. We found that when parents want to marry off under aged daughters, these local representatives are often approached for assistance in circumventing legal age restrictions. Exploiting their authority, these representatives manipulate official records by altering the date of births. This is often done in exchange of money or other gift items by the potential brides' families. Our observation and the FGDs suggest that the locally elected representatives do not take the issue of child marriage seriously and often they promote this practice as a long-standing social norm. However, majority of our respondents highlighted the positive role of local administration, such as village police, UNO

(Upazila Nirbahi Officer) and other government offices in preventing child marriage. Participants shared that local administration has always been very helpful and taken the issue of child marriage seriously, whereas the elected representatives seem reluctant. The excerpt from FGDs:

Our local government, particularly the union Parishad, is responsible for issuing marriage certificates through the chairman. The members and chairman manipulate official marriage records to alter the ages of children. It is expected to witness cases where a 13-year-old girl's age is fraudulently recorded as 18 or a 16-year-old boy's age is changed to 22. Such practices are widespread in our villages. But we always got the help from the local administration like police and the UNOs. Even government helpline (999) is very effective in this regard.

During this discussion, the research team asked about the effectiveness of online birth registration to combat child marriage and the respondents informed that due to the corruption among the local representatives, the online registration is not working effectively:

Interviewer: But nowadays, birth certificates are issued as soon as a child is born and the system is online.

Respondent 3: That is a very recent practice, but you can falsify that too at least for arranging the child marriage. Some people even change the names to create a fake birth certificate. When you have a fake birth certificate, even the police cannot stop the marriage. Because they do not know that certificate is fake. The problem is using this strategy; many families manage to arrange child marriages despite legal restrictions.

5.2.7 Local Matchmakers and Child Marriage

Among other factors, the FGDs of this study highlighted the role of local matchmakers in perpetuating the child marriage in rural areas. As discussed among the respondents, matchmakers exert considerable pressure on families to arrange child marriage even though they are well aware of the legal restrictions. They consider marriage arrangements as a financial

gain and therefore manipulate families by exploiting the societal norms and fears. Our respondents shared that the level of familial awareness has been increased in the recent past. However, the matchmakers convince many families that delaying marriage might make the girls undesirable in the marriage market. Due to this pressure, some families arrange child marriage even after knowing the negative consequences. One respondent's comment on this:

Here, I would like to emphasise the role of matchmakers in perpetuating the practice of child marriage. Matchmakers exert significant pressure on families, influencing them to arrange marriages for the girl child at an early age. Their primary concern lies not in the well-being or future of the girls but in advancing their interests and securing financial gains. These matchmakers treat marriage arrangements as a business, prioritising their profits over the lives and aspirations of young girls. They often manipulate families by playing on societal norms and fears.

The participants highlighted that the girls from lower income and lower educational attainment families are the primary 'targets' of the matchmakers. It was interesting to learn that the matchmakers spread misinformation about women's education and employment prospects. Additionally, they mainly convince the women members of the families, and use the gender norm that marriage can ensure economic security in women's lives:

These matchmakers first approach the mother, who is often considered as vulnerable, and try to convince her that the girl will be happier if she gets married. Mothers often become confused and worry about their daughter's future. Matchmakers manipulate this fear by saying, "How will she get a job without a bribe?" They make it seem like education won't guarantee her a job. But I believe bribery isn't necessary to succeed.

Overall, the findings and discussion in this section highlights the multifaceted and complex factors of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. However, our analysis suggest that all the factors are deeply rooted to the traditional gender norms of patriarchal Bangladeshi society. Despite some positive changes in parental attitudes, patriarchal gender regime

continues to perpetuate and reinforce child marriage in rural Bangladesh. To address this, it is important to work towards challenging those norms and promoting gender equality through different programmes, such as awareness campaign and building community agency. The next sub-section discusses the role of Nijera Kori and the effectiveness of its programmes to promote gender equality and thus combating child marriage.

5.3 Impact Of Nijera Kori and Its Programmes on Child Marriage

This sub-section discusses the impact of Nijera Kori in building agency to prevent harmful norms and to combat child marriage through various programmes. We divide the discussion under two broad themes: the first theme will focus on how Nijera Kori is building agency among the adult members and the second theme will discuss the agency building strategies among the adolescent group of Nijera Kori. The field visit to ten working areas of Nijera Kori found that both the adult and adolescent members are working to promote gender equality in their respective localities. However, the research team found that the programmes targeted to and run by the adolescent members play critical role in preventing child marriage and other harmful gender norms.

5.3.1 Role of the Adult Members in Preventing Child Marriage

The FGDs with the adult members of Nijera Kori highlights how this organization is building individual and collective agency among the working-class women and men in rural Bangladesh. The members discussed that they receive basic trainings on the importance of education, land and property rights, human rights, gender equality, and access to information. The knowledge and information gathered in these trainings are identified as ‘eye-opening’ to the members. Majority of the members, both women and men, shared how these training programmed made them aware of their value as a Bangladeshi citizen and thus provided them with ‘confidence’. They shared their experiences of marginalization and lack of access to formal schooling and other opportunities. However, all of them highlighted how their involvement with Nijera Kori has impacted their lives positively by providing them a platform to be ‘united’ and working

collectively to prevent child marriage in their locality. Excerpts from our FGD in Pakerhat:

Respondent 1: We draw strength and courage from our organisation, supported by training we received from various places, including Dhaka. This training has equipped us with the skills and knowledge to address child marriage effectively. As a result, people in our community respect us and often heed our advice in efforts to prevent child marriage.

Respondent 3: Whenever we face difficulties, our brothers and sisters in the organisation stand by each other. They come forward to help in times of need. We always try to solve problems by discussing things with everyone. To resolve issues, we don't necessarily need the help of the Upazila Parishad member or chairman. We have a committee where we try to fix problems ourselves. If we can't solve a problem on our own, we seek help from the authorities, and when necessary, we organise meetings and rallies with our brothers and sisters in the organisation. Together, we make decisions and take necessary actions. When required, we also seek help from the legal aid office. For more minor issues, we visit the police station and handle things efficiently there as well.

In their discussion, the members shared the importance of information and knowledge in building capacities to recognise gender-based inequalities in their lives. Through knowledge and information gained from Nijera Kori, these members were able to critically analyse the social issues. Their analytical capacity contributed to the positive social changes in their families and communities. One of the women members shared their lived experience of how they realised their inner capacity to challenge harmful gender norms:

The trainings of Nijera Kori have given us the ability to analyse various social issues. In the past, when we went to the market, we had to endure unpleasant comments, especially from men. Now, we can analyse such comments, and explain them to others. Even our husbands have started to realise these things. They understand the importance of our voices and say, "You have activities today; when will you go out?"

Before joining this organization, we did not feel empowered to stand against the unequal practice of families and communities. Now, we are gaining rights and freedom because of the organization. We know how to manage our families and exercise our rights within them, and we view our sons and daughters equally.

The above quote clearly shows the agency of the women members and their role in transforming the unequal gender norms in their lives as well as in the lives of their families. The male members openly discussed the role of Nijera Kori in changing the views of them surrounding their role in housework and care work. They shared how their attitudes have been changed regarding girls' education, employment opportunities and child marriage. One of the male members' comments:

After becoming a member of Bhumihin Sangatha (Nijera Kori), I realized that household work is not a sole responsibility of women; everyone should contribute equally. Now, I help my wife with household chores and support the women in my family. On a community level, I visit the local clinics to raise awareness about these issues. Now, I can understand that girl child and boy child are equal and they should get equal opportunities of education and employment. I have two daughters and there is community pressure to marry them off; but I strongly protested those comments and told them not to give me such advice. I aspire to educate my daughters as far as they want.

In the FGDs, the adult members not only discussed the positive changes in their lives, but also highlighted how they are contributing to prevent child marriage in their communities through various programmes. They discussed their activities of collecting information on child marriage and directly intervening in those contexts either by talking to the families or with the support of local administration (Police and UNO):

Interviewer: What specific strategies do you follow to stop a child marriage?

Respondent 4: First of all, we talk to the families and emphasise the health risks of child marriage and encourage parents to redirect the money they intend to spend on marriage toward their daughter's education. We explain that by investing in education, their daughter can support them financially in the future. If she marries early, however, she will likely remain dependent on someone else. We stress that education offers girls a path to independence and the freedom to shape their own lives. Mothers, in particular, are often receptive to these discussions because many of them have endured child marriages themselves. They also seek our assistance talking with their children, helping them avoid premature relationships and stay focused on their studies.

Respondent 5: Sometimes we fail to make the families understand. They eventually arrange the marriage. In those cases, inform the time and location of the marriage to the local police and to the UNO; sometimes we call the government helpline (999) and inform them about the child marriage.

The members regularly meet at Nijera Kori's local office and in a specific place at their particular locality (often known as *Uthan Baithak*) and fix their intervention plan/ strategies based on the available information on child marriage and other harmful norms. The work strategies include: writing drama and songs on the social problems pronounced in their locality; presenting those songs and drama in different areas, mainly in the crowded places; and arranging awareness campaign for the rural people. The participants specifically mentioned the effectiveness of the cultural programs and rallies in creating awareness about child marriage. In Pakerhat, the members discussed the success stories of these programmes:

One of our most notable initiatives was the cycle rally. We organised a rally with over 300 girls, all wearing specially designed t-shirts with empowering slogans. As part of this event, we also held demonstrations at the hospital, voicing demands related to reproductive and menstrual health.

In addition to the rally, we regularly stage street dramas and musical performances in villages where child marriage rates are exceptionally high. Our cultural team made up of adolescents and group members, practices consistently to prepare for these performances. We also have a separate team responsible for identifying relevant issues and organising community meetings. These meetings include monthly sessions with school students, where we collect information and explain their role in combating child marriage. When necessary, we speak directly with parents, and these conversations often prove successful in making them understand the consequences of early marriage. As a result, many parents and children have become actively involved in the social movement.

This study found that the song or the drama performed by the members of Nijera Kori impacted most in changing the community attitude towards child marriage. The research team interviewed non-member families and adolescent girls who prevented child marriage and majority of them became aware of the health consequences of child marriage through the dramas and songs played by the members of Nijera Kori. The non-member families shared that they were aware of the legal age of marriage but they did not care about those until they come to know about the maternal and child health consequences of child marriage. By portraying the real-life struggles of young girls who experienced child marriages, these dramas effectively resonate with the lives of rural audience. As a result, this visual representation of child marriage and its consequences have significant impacts to raise awareness among rural people. One respondent shared the effectiveness of the street dramas and songs:

We raise awareness through songs and street dramas, often performing dramas based on real-life stories within our communities. Some of our songs and dramas are incredibly impactful, resonating deeply with those who have lost their children to child marriage. We usually portray the health consequences as we observed that parents care a lot about their children's lives and the groom's family care about the lives of their grant children. So, we deliberately portray the death of the mother or the child. These emotionally powerful dramas tend to engage people more effectively.

5.3.2 Role of the Adolescent Members in Preventing Child Marriage

Nijera Kori is not only organizing and building capacity among the landless adult members, but also, they are working to build capacities of the adolescent people from the marginalized families. For this, in every office, Nijera Kori has recently set up a dedicated 'adolescent corner'- a separate room equipped with educational and recreational facilities, such as a laptop with internet connection, story books, basic skills manuals, traditional musical instruments etc. As we observed, the adolescents visit the corner on every Fridays and Saturdays; sometimes they visit in the evening time on the week days. For this corner, there is a facilitator trained in gender and adolescent issues. The adolescent corner of Nijera Kori is identified as one of the effective interventions in building agency among the young girls and boys and in preventing child marriage and other harmful social norms. The research team was surprised to observe the level of confidence and awareness among the adolescents in each working area of Nijera Kori. Many of the young girls and boys received basic trainings on gender issues and human rights issues in the regional training centres of Nijera Kori. The adolescents were aware of the sexual and reproductive health, consequence of child marriage, and other gender and human rights issues. They openly talked with the research team about their sexual and reproductive health and it was interesting to observe how these group challenged the social taboo of discussing those topics. This awareness and confidence play significant role in adolescents' lives as well the lives of their peers in schools and communities. Excerpt from our adolescent FGD in Saghatta area:

Adolescent Girl 1: Yes, I have had training. In the training, we were taught about physical and health education, something I did not know much about before. After participating, I learned a lot of new information.

Adolescent Girl 2: Only two or three of us have had training here. I learned a lot about body growth and how it develops at our age. We have limited opportunities in schools and families to learn these issues and discuss openly. In this corner, we have got that opportunity. These discussions have life-changing impact on us. We also disseminate these information and knowledge with our friends in schools and communities. When I shared this information with my friends and classmates in school, some were really eager to learn more about it, though a few felt shy when we discussed it. I think they are more aware now.

Adolescent Boy 1: Yes, we had some ideas about child marriage through different posts or videos on social media platforms, but we got a clearer understanding after coming here. We learned about the negative consequences of child marriage for both boys and girls. We took oath that we will not allow child marriages in our lives. I also stopped the child marriage of my sister. We spread our knowledge among the family members.

A similar experience was shared by the adolescents in Bagatipara:

Adolescent Girl 1: The training we received in Bogura has been eye-opening, and if we share what we have learned with our friends and classmates, we can help spread awareness. One key topic was gender-based tolerance, where we learned about the challenges girls face in our families and society. While boys rarely encounter restrictions, girls are often held back under the banner of “societal values,” which discriminates against them and keeps them from advancing. Girls are confined within the walls of their homes in a patriarchal society, seen only as future housewives meant for domestic chores. These societal norms are deeply rooted, and we never talked about them in school.

Adolescent Girl 2: Through the trainings, I feel like my perspective has shifted. Before, I could not even imagine a society where men and women had equal opportunities within a patriarchy, but now I believe that change is possible. Every person, man or woman, has dreams and aspirations, and both should have the space and support to achieve them.

Adolescent Boy 1: I believe that if we share these ideas with our friends, they will also start becoming aware of these issues. But even before reaching out to friends, I think it is crucial to begin these conversations with our families. If our families become more aware, they can start to discuss these values with other families. Step by step, we could then spread what we have learned throughout schools, colleges, and beyond.

The above series of quotes highlight the significance of Nijera Kori's training programs in building adolescent agency. From adolescent members' experience, it was interesting to learn that they are aware of the patriarchal norms and the harmful consequences of those. Moreover, the adolescents identified the significance of knowing about the sexual and reproductive health and discussing those topics openly within families. In their discussions, they have emphasized the importance of including the comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education in the curriculum:

In school, there is not much open discussion about the sexual and reproductive health related topics. In the adolescent corner, this subject is discussed more openly, almost as if friends are having a normal conversation and sharing a lot of information. In school, when boys and girls study together and these topics come up, they often laugh about them and make inappropriate comments later. Here, we are encouraged to have open and respectful discussions about these topics. It is really important to include comprehensive sexual education in our curriculum and it should be discussed openly in the school. What we learn at Nijera Kori, we share with our school and community friends. We are interested to know about our bodies and the bodily changes during adolescence, but we have limited scope for learning (Adolescent FGD, Dumuria).

The above quote clearly highlights the difference between the way sexual and reproductive health topics are addressed in schools versus in the adolescent corner supported by Nijera Kori. In schools, there is often a lack of open discussion on these topics. The quote underscores the need for comprehensive sexual education in schools and highlights the positive impact of having a space like the adolescent corner where open and respectful discussions can take place. Adolescent members further shared how the discussion on sexual and reproductive health can build awareness among the young girls and boys about the harmful consequences of child marriage.

Our study found that Nijera Kori's adolescent group follow different strategies to prevent child marriage in their areas. Those include: using ICT to collect area wise information of child marriage; awareness campaign in schools and other areas; building community level awareness programs; engagement with school authorities and local administration. For example, many of the adolescents shared that whenever they receive the information of child marriage in their community, their whole team tried to convince the families of both the bride and the groom. Usually, they highlighted the health consequences of child marriage and in many cases they were successful. However, in some cases, when they could not convince the families to stop child marriage, the adolescent often sought help from the local administration or they informed it to the government's emergency helpline (999). Excerpts from our FGD in Pakerhat area:

Interviewer: How do you create awareness? What are the strategies?
Adolescent Boy 1: We organize courtyard meetings and perform street dramas.
Adolescent Girl 1: We perform music and enact street dramas during the courtyard meetings.
Adolescent Boy 2: In villages, people are not very interested in long speeches. That is why we incorporate songs and street dramas into the meetings.

Adolescent Girl 3: When we arrive with instruments like the harmonium and tabla, people know something interesting is about to happen. We also wear specific costumes for our performances and choose dramas based on the relevant issues in the region we are visiting.

We found that this generation effectively used ICT to prevent child marriage in their localities. As evidenced in our study, the adolescents formed area specific ‘WhatsApp’ or ‘Messenger’ group to collect the information on where and when child marriage is happening. In these group, they also add the non-member adolescents and share various contents (videos) on how child marriage restricts adolescents’ potentials. They also discuss their experiences and thoughts on gender norms and collectively develop the strategies to challenge those norms. Additionally, the adolescents regularly use the government’s emergency helpline (999) to prevent child marriage, dowry, and domestic violence. One adolescent boy shared their experience of leveraging ICT to prevent child marriage in Jahangirabad:

Adolescent Boy 5: The first time I tried to stop a child marriage; I was with my mother. I received the WhatsApp message of where it was occurring. Immediately, I called the police through 999. In our area, we regularly call 999, because that is the quickest way of informing the police. Even we informed it to our classmates that they can use this helpline to stop child marriage and any other family violence issue. One of our friends (girl) stopped her own marriage by calling 999; they are very sincere and helpful to this issue. I think, there should be designated helpline numbers for preventing child marriage.

This finding clearly indicates that there is high potential of using ICT to prevent child marriage in rural areas, particularly by engaging the adolescents. However, those interventions should also include the trainings on internet and smartphone safety to avoid any potential harms to the young people.

The adolescent members also arrange different campaigns to create awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage among the

community. For example, in Pakerhat area, they arranged a cycle rally of young girls in the crowded places. As shared by the young girls of Nijera Kori, the cycle rally boosts their confidence as well as made the community people aware of the impacts of child marriage. The adolescent groups further shared their strategies of creating family-level awareness. They discussed how they deliberately deployed the traditional gender norms in challenging the practice of child marriage. One respondent in Pakerhat area shared:

When we talk to the families, we do not always challenge their decision of child marriage openly. Instead, we intentionally use some of the gender norms. We share that child marriage may lead to early pregnancy that can impact on the beauty of the young girls and eventually the girl can be divorced if she lost her beauty. There are several examples in our area that the girl is being divorced after the child birth due to the loss of her physical beauty and attractiveness. We present those examples to the parents who wants their daughter to marry off. We have observed that if we share this example, parents give a second thought that child marriage can lead to divorce which will eventually put additionally burden on them.

The above quote illustrates a strategy used to dissuade families from arranging child marriage. Instead of directly confronting the families' decision, the approach involves using existing gender norms to make the case against child marriage more persuasive. The adolescent also plays songs and perform drama to build awareness among the community people. Those performances not only create community-level awareness, but also build adolescent members' confidence in addressing various social issues.

Overall, the discussion with the adolescents show that the training received from Nijera Kori and the sharing and learning platform of 'adolescent corner' played significant role in building adolescent agency. We found that all of them, irrespective to their gender identity, are very confident, courageous, aware and aspired to reach their own dreams of changing the lives of themselves and their communities. Many of them shared that their personal aspiration is the major driver for changing themselves

and their community. This section will conclude with the story of an adolescent girl member of Nijera Kori who prevented her child marriage, abandoned by the parents, but did not stop dreaming:

I have always wished to study further and do something on my own. There are three daughters in the family, and I wanted to take responsibility for my parents in the future. After I turned 18, my parents started looking for potential matches. They were insistent, but I kept telling them I did not want to marry at that time. I was a member of adolescent corner and I knew what could happen if I married early.

A marriage proposal came just a few months before I turned 18. When the groom's family visited again, it was clear they liked me and were ready to proceed. My parents more or less finalized the marriage. I tried to make them understand that I did not want to marry. When my parents did not listen, I reached out to a friend and stayed at her house for a few days. Later, my grandmother took me to her home. Because of that, the marriage did not happen. Now, my parents have stopped providing money for my education, but that could not stop me. I am doing bachelors in a local college and doing a part-time job at a clinic. I wanted to be a doctor but could not do that; I am planning to receive nursing trainings when I am done with this study. I am working closely with Nijera Kori's adolescent corner and trying to aspire other girls with my example.

The above quote clearly shows how agentic the adolescent girl is and how their aspiration towards education and paid employment inspired them to prevent her own child marriage. From the interviews with the girls who prevented child marriage and the adolescent FGDs, we found that instilling aspiration and nurturing them among the adolescents is very important to combat child marriage in rural areas. Many of them shared that before joining the adolescent group of Nijera Kori, they did not have a 'dream' given their lower socio-economic condition. But, all of them confidently shared that they can navigate the socio-economic barriers and contribute to the well-being of themselves, their families and communities.

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5.3.3 Spillover Effect of Nijera Kori's Community Program

Nijera Kori's program demonstrates a significant spillover effect in the prevention of child marriage. While their primary objective centres on raising awareness about the detrimental impacts of this practice, a crucial secondary outcome is the active role their members play in intervening to prevent such marriages within their communities. This proactive engagement, stemming from increased understanding and empowerment fostered by Nijera Kori's initiatives, represents a powerful, indirect contribution to the reduction of child marriage rates, extending the organization's impact beyond its core educational mission. This localized intervention capacity underscores the effectiveness of grassroots awareness campaigns in generating tangible social change. One respondent from Saghatta area shared the spillover effect of their work:

Previously, child marriage was prevalent in our community. Our village has a neighbourhood called Majhipara, where the Hindu community resides. Child marriage used to occur there in the past. However, there has been a positive change in this community. They have learnt from our practices that girls should not be prepared for child marriage, they should be educated and employed. This way, the member families are changing the community perception and practice about child marriage. I think this is a hidden success of Nijera Kori.

The above quote highlights a positive change in a specific community where child marriage was once common. The community perception has been shifted positively, with families now recognizing the importance of education and employment for girls instead of preparing them for child marriage. The above quote further suggests that Nijera Kori's impact goes beyond visible achievements and includes changing mindset and community norms through the practices of member families. Individuals and families who have adopted the program's principles influence their peers, creating a ripple effect that extends the program's reach. In addition, the members shared that success stories and positive role models who have benefited from Nijera Kori's programs serve as powerful examples for the others to follow. This way, Nijera Kori is not only impacting the

lives of their member families, but also shaping the community perception about child marriage and girls' empowerment.

6 Policy Recommendation

Based on our in-depth interviews and FGDs with both the adolescent and adult groups affiliated with Nijera Kori, we have identified several actionable policy recommendations. These recommendations aim to effectively prevent child marriage and reduce gender inequality in rural Bangladesh. The proposed policy measures are thematically presented as follows:

Capacity Building and Awareness

- **Gender Equality Training:** Implement comprehensive training programs on gender equality for local government officials, religious leaders, Kazis and community influencers (matchmakers). These programs should emphasize the harmful effects of child marriage and the benefits of empowering girls.
- **Teachers Training:** Equip school teachers with the knowledge and resources to identify and address the risks of child marriage. Include gender equality and child rights in teacher training curricula.
- **Parental Education:** Conduct workshops and awareness campaigns for parents, highlighting the importance of girls' education, health, and economic empowerment.
- **Youth Engagement:** Empower youth to become advocates against child marriage within their communities. Utilize peer-to-peer education and digital platforms to spread awareness and mobilize action.

Economic Incentives and Opportunities

- **Conditional Cash Transfers:** Strengthen and extend existing stipends or cash transfers, adjusted for purchasing power, to families who commit to keeping their daughters in school and postponing their marriage. These programs are crucial in incentivizing education and easing the economic burdens that often lead to child marriage, particularly among lower-income families.

- **Vocational Training:** Expand access to vocational training and skills development programs for girls and young women. This can enhance their employability and economic independence, reducing their vulnerability to child marriage.
- **Career Guidance:** Disseminate information about career opportunities and pathways for girls and young women. Organize career fairs and mentorship programs to inspire and guide them towards their goals.

Social and Cultural Change

- **Positive Role Models:** Identify and celebrate successful women and girls from rural communities who have achieved educational and/or career success. Their stories can inspire and motivate others to challenge gender norms and pursue their aspirations.
- **Cultural Activities and Sports:** Encourage and support the participation of girls and young women in cultural activities, sports, and recreational programs. This can boost their self-esteem, social skills, and overall well-being.
- **Safe Spaces:** Establish adolescent-friendly spaces within schools and communities where girls can access information, support, and guidance on issues related to their health, education, and rights.

Digital Literacy and Online Safety

- **Digital Literacy Training:** Integrate digital literacy and online safety into school curricula. Equip young people with the skills to navigate the digital world responsibly and safely.
- **Responsible Use of Technology:** Educate youth about the potential risks and harms associated with online platforms and social media. Promote responsible digital citizenship and ethical online behaviour.

Health and Well-being

- **Health Education:** Raise awareness about the negative health consequences of child marriage, including maternal and child mortality, early pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections.

- **Access to Healthcare:** Ensure that girls and young women have access to quality healthcare services, including reproductive health and family planning.
- **Mandatory Pre-Marriage Counselling:** Introduce mandatory pre-marriage counselling sessions for all couples seeking marriage registration. These sessions should be conducted by trained professionals and focus on the legal age of marriage, the consequences of child marriage, and the benefits of delayed marriage.

Multi-Sectoral Collaboration

- **Digitalization of Marriage Records:** Implement a nationwide digital database for marriage registrations, accessible to government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and law enforcement agencies. This database will ensure real-time verification of the ages of both parties involved in the marriage, preventing the registration of underage marriages.
- **Integration with Birth Registration System:** Integrate the marriage registration system with the national birth registration system to enable seamless verification of the ages of individuals seeking marriage. This integration will help in cross-referencing birth records to ensure compliance with the legal age of marriage.
- **Government-NGO Partnerships:** Foster collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community-based organizations to implement and scale up effective interventions.
- **Community Engagement:** Involve community leaders, religious institutions, and families in the design and implementation of programs to ensure their cultural relevance and sustainability.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- **Data Collection:** Strengthen data collection and monitoring systems to track the prevalence of child marriage and gender inequality in rural Bangladesh.

- **Impact Assessment:** Conduct rigorous evaluations of programs and policies to measure their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

By implementing these comprehensive policy recommendations, Bangladesh can accelerate progress towards ending child marriage and achieving gender equality in rural areas. This will empower girls and young women to reach their full potential and contribute to the development of their communities and the nation.

7 Conclusion

The research findings illuminate the complex and multifaceted nature of child marriage in rural Bangladesh. While some progress has been made in reducing its prevalence, the practice persists due to a confluence of deeply entrenched sociocultural and economic factors. Traditional gender norms, which dictate women's roles and perpetuate gender inequality, remain a primary driver. The perception of girls as an economic burden, coupled with the belief that their value diminishes with age, leads families to prioritize child marriage over education and empowerment.

Economic hardship further exacerbates the issue, as many marginalised families may view child marriage as a means of financial relief or as a way to secure their daughters' futures in the face of limited opportunities. The lack of awareness among parents and adolescents about the detrimental consequences of child marriage, including health risks, curtailed education, and reduced economic prospects, further perpetuates the practice. The influence of local matchmakers, who prioritize child marriage over the well-being of girls, and the misinterpretation of religious texts by some local leaders to justify child marriage, also contribute to its persistence.

The role of Nijera Kori in combating child marriage is pivotal. Through its community-based programs, Nijera Kori empowers individuals, particularly women and adolescents, to challenge harmful social norms and advocate for change. By providing a platform for learning, awareness, and support, the organization fosters a sense of agency and resilience

among community members, enabling them to resist child marriage and support girls' education and empowerment.

While the study's findings highlight significant challenges, they also offer hope for the future. The historical declining trend in child marriage rates, coupled with increased awareness and the active involvement of organizations like Nijera Kori, indicates that change is possible. However, sustained and rigorous efforts are needed to address the root causes of child marriage and create an environment where girls can thrive.

Future research could delve deeper into the impact of specific interventions, such as economic empowerment programs, comprehensive sex education and promotion of girls' sports, on child marriage rates. Longitudinal studies could track the long-term effects of child marriage on individuals and communities, providing valuable insights for targeted interventions. Additionally, research could explore the role of men and boys in challenging gender norms and promoting gender equality within their communities.

Overall, this study underscores the urgent need for a multi-pronged approach to end child marriage in rural Bangladesh. By addressing the root causes, challenging harmful social norms, and empowering girls and communities, Bangladesh can create a future where all girls can exercise their agency to choose when and whom to marry, free from coercion and exploitation.

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Appendix

Supplementary Findings

During the interviews and FGDs, the respondents shared some of the important insights on the positive social changes, recent dowry dynamic in rural Bangladesh and the post 5th August rise of religious fundamentalism. We did not incorporate these findings in our main report. This document presents the summary of those findings.

Post-5th August Rise of Religious Fundamentalism

Though it was not a pre-defined theme for our study, this discussion emerged in the adult FGD while discussing on the role of the religious factors behind child marriage. Most of the respondents shared that while the religious fundamentalism has always been existed in Bangladeshi society, there has been a recent rise of these activities following the decline of the previous political regime. The respondents discussed that the problem is these religious group are now feeling empowered and spreading their beliefs and thoughts openly. Many of the women members shared the primary goal of these fundamentalist groups is to restrict women's mobility and progress. Both the men and women members of Nijera Kori suggested government and non-government collaboration in rural areas to address the religious fundamentalism.

Distinct Dowry Dynamic

While discussing the factors of child marriage, the members of our focus group highlighted the decreasing trend of dowry. However, they discussed how the practice of dowry has evolved over time. While dowry demands are not as overt as they were before, the expectation of receiving gifts from the bride's family reins prevalent. Excerpt from our FGD:

Interviewer: What is the dowry situation in your area?

Together: The style of dowry has changed a lot. People don't demand it openly like before, but they still expect it in the form of gifts.

Respondent 2: Dowry during the marriage itself isn't as common now, but there's still a mentality that creates an indirect expectation from the bride's family. Many families now give gifts to the groom, like furniture, electronics, bikes, or even a house. Sometimes they even help the groom get a job or pay a bribe to secure one. After five or six months, the groom's family often begins asking for money for various needs, like buying a bike, land, or finding a job. There's an unspoken belief that it's normal to expect and receive these gifts.

Respondent 3: It has definitely decreased. Nowadays, people are more educated and enlightened.

Respondent 4: (with a laugh) As the society is more enlightened by the light of education, the bridegroom's family feels embarrassed to directly talk about dowry. So, the technique for seeking dowry from the bride's family has changed now. The bridegroom family now says that how you will send the bride to live in her new home completely depends upon you, we won't directly demand dowry. This new technique of demanding dowry has pressurized the girl's family even more, now the girl's family has to spend even more money. Now the bride's family has to give all the furniture necessary for the bride to maintain her new home. In some cases, the bridegroom's family is being told that they don't have to give cash money, but it will be good if they help the bridegroom to go to the office every day. In this way they indirectly demand a motorbike for the would-be husband.

As evidenced in our interviews and discussion, dowry has become so deeply rooted in marriage practices in Bangladesh that even those who fundamentally oppose it cannot escape its clutches. Families feel immense pressure to comply with the dowry system to avoid social stigma. If dowry is not given or accepted, people often jump to the conclusion that the groom must have some hidden flaw or disability, implying that no dowry was offered/ taken because he was not “worth” it. One of the respondent's comments:

Dowry has become so ingrained in our marriage rituals that even families who oppose it on principle are not free from societal expectations. If dowry isn't given, people assume that the groom has some flaw or disability.

Another respondent described how the practice of dowry is not always driven by the forceful demands but often by the willingness of the bride's family. We found that families may offer dowry to secure a desirable match for their daughters, hoping to ensure her future stability and social standing. Excerpt from our FGD:

When it comes to dowry, it is not always about compulsion. The girl's family is often eager to offer a dowry to ensure they don't miss out on a good match. For example, a young man recently received a job offer at a bank in my neighbourhood. Even though he hasn't joined yet, the bride's family has already promised to transfer all their property to him. This practice continues because dowry is tied to social respect and a sense of security.

Particularly, the respondents in Northern Bangladesh emphasized that the dowry situation in their region is significantly worse compared to the other parts of the country. One respondent shared:

The dowry situation in our Dinajpur district is far worse than in other parts of North Bengal. Here, dowry has become a symbol of social status, deeply embedded in our community's values. Even the poorest families are not exempt from this practice. In many cases, these families are forced to pay a dowry of at least two lakh taka for their daughters' marriages despite their limited means.

Changes in son preference

The respondents highlighted a positive shift in parental attitude regarding the preferences for son. They shared that traditionally, many parents believed that only sons could support them in old age. But this view has shifted, and parents now recognize that girl child is as capable of providing those support. One respondent from Kumarkhali shared:

Parents now have a different perspective when it comes to their daughters, especially regarding their future. In the past, many parents believed that only sons could support them in old age. But now, they feel that daughters are just as capable. They're committed to educating their daughters, wanting to see them succeed and ensuring they find good partners. Parents now believe their daughters are as capable as their sons in caring for them, if needed, and they take pride in helping their daughters build independent, successful lives. I have a cousin who has a job now, and I feel society views it positively—especially since her parents don't have a son. She's taking care of them, and this really shows that daughters are just as capable of supporting their families.

The discussion in Dumuria and Dhanbari reflected a significant change in the preferences for sons in rural Bangladesh, highlighting a positive shift towards valuing the girl child equally. The research team begins the conversation by asking if the strong preferences for sons in rural areas is still common, respondents acknowledge that the preference still exists but has decreased significantly compared to the past. Respondents emphasized that women's enrolment in education and engagement in paid work contributed significantly to alter the preferences for son. In rural Bangladesh, families started to believe that girl child can provide for their parents if they are equally supported for education and employment. This has led to a decline in the traditional belief that only sons can provide for their parents. The conversation in Dumuria:

Interviewer: In the past, there was a strong preference for sons in rural areas. Is this still common?

Respondent 2: That preference is still present, but it has decreased significantly compared to before.

Respondent 8: here was a time when very few girls could access education, as it was considered something only boys should pursue. Gradually, this mindset has changed. Families now understand that education is a necessity and that when any family member—whether a son or daughter—gets educated and secures a job in the future, it eases the family's financial burden. Moreover, girls now have greater access to education due to low costs in government schools, free books, stipends, and scholarships in many cases.

