

AN END IN SIGHT TO EARLY MARRIAGE? EVIDENCE FROM IFPRI'S 2015 SURVEY IN RURAL BANGLADESH

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1. Context of early marriage in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's enabling policy environment and national commitment have brought about dramatic improvements in nutrition, food security, poverty, and women's empowerment. However, early child marriage still presents unique social, economic, and political challenges that stifle development progress in Bangladesh.

Young married girls are more likely to drop out of school and, consequently, miss out on future job opportunities and income potential. Further, the power imbalance between young brides and their husbands leave girls more susceptible to domestic violence and other risks. Recognizing the importance of eradicating early marriage, the Government of Bangladesh has committed to reducing the rate of marriage for girls between ages 15 to 18 by one-third and stopping marriage for girls under age 15 by 2021.

Upon request of the Governance Innovation Unit of the Prime Minister's Office, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, IFPRI has prepared this research note using 2015 nationally representative household survey data. This note provides an overview of the state of early marriage in rural Bangladesh, changes in marriage trends over a twenty-year time period, and briefly explores ways to reduce the incidence of early child marriage in Bangladesh as a conduit for development progress.

2. IFPRI in Bangladesh

Founded in 1975, IFPRI is an independent nonprofit international research organization and one of 15 international institutes of the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). IFPRI brings over three decades of experience in Bangladesh conducting food policy research, providing policy support, and strengthening stakeholders' capacity. IFPRI scaled up its efforts in 2010 through the Bangladesh Policy Research and Strategy Support Program for Food Security and Agricultural Development (PRSSP), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The program fills the need for demand-driven food and agricultural policy research. It generates information on critical issues, strengthens analytical capacity within the country, and stimulates policy dialogue.

3. Data and method of estimation

Data for this note were collected from the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey (BIHS) conducted in 2015. Designed by IFPRI's PRSSP and funded by USAID, BIHS is statistically representative nationally of rural Bangladesh, and the rural areas of all seven administrative divisions of the country: Barisal, Chittagong, Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Sylhet.

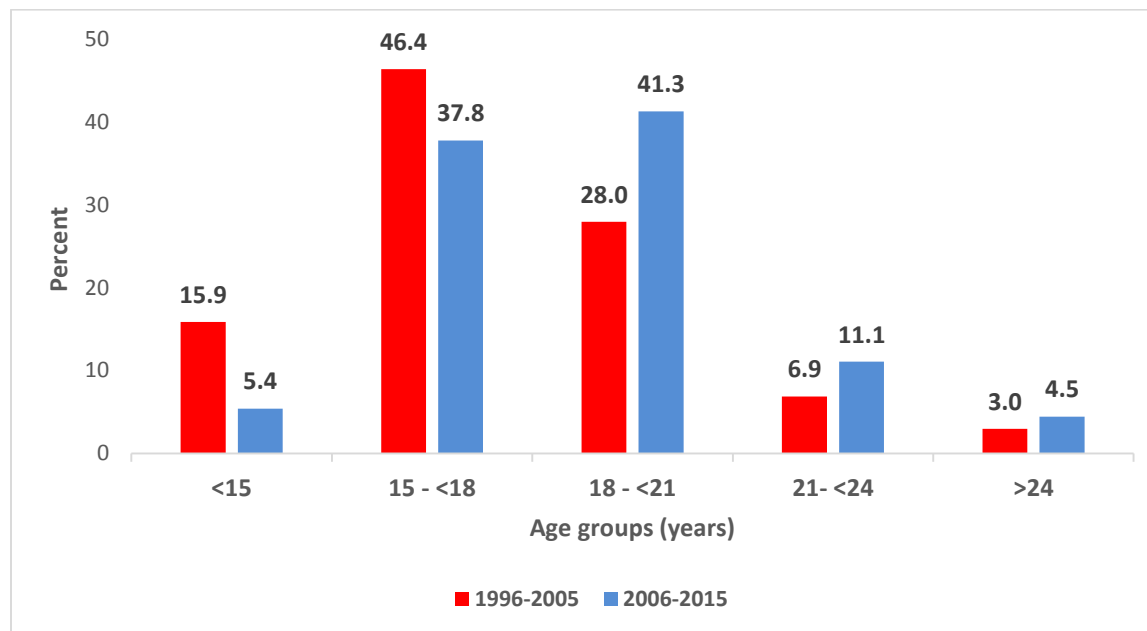
In 2015, BIHS respondents were asked (1) age at the time of survey, and (2) age at marriage. From this data, we first estimated the total number of years each respondent had been married. To create a subset of women and men who got married in the last 10 years, namely between 2006 and 2015, we considered only respondents whose years of marriage (conjugal age) were between 0 and 9 years (inclusive), where 0 years represent marriage in 2015 and 9 years represents marriage in 2006. Similarly, to identify only the women and men who got married in the decade prior to 2006—2015, namely, between 1996 and 2005, respondents whose years of marriage (conjugal age) were between 10 and 19 years (inclusive) were considered. We then created different age ranges for the incidence of marriage within the range (expressed in percentage terms). Using the age ranges and the incidence of marriage of women and men marrying in two different decades, we derived the distribution of age at marriage for both time periods. We followed similar method for division-level analysis to analyze regional patterns.

To understand the relationship between women's age at marriage, household income, and education, we used a different sample of respondents. From 2015 BIHS data, we only considered women ages 30 years or younger at the time of the survey and determined their age at marriage, which allowed us to do the analysis with a larger sample size. We used per capita monthly household expenditure as proxy for income, which is standard practice. Similarly, for women ages 30 years or younger at the time of survey, we determined their years of schooling from the survey data, and calculated the average years of schooling attained by the women for each age-at-marriage range.

4. Incidence of early child marriage

Figure 1 shows changes in girls' age at marriage from 1996–2005 to 2006–2015. The incidence of girls getting married under age 18 dropped overall; however, girls under age 15 had the largest decline in marriage from 1996–2005 to 2006–2015 (66 percent). This indicates that the government is on track to eradicate marriage for girls under age 15 by 2021.

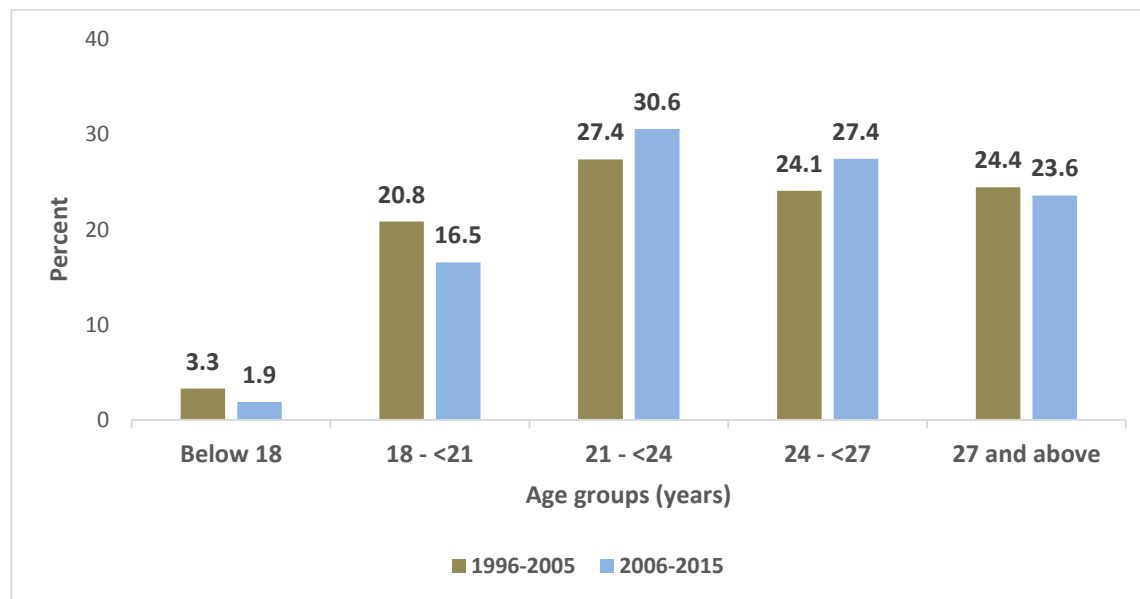
Figure 1 Changes in female age at marriage by age groups from 1996—2005 to 2006—2015



Source: 2015 Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, IFPRI.

The decline in early marriage among boys between 1996—2005 and 2006—2015 is consistent with girls (Figure 2). Comparing 1996—2005 to 2006—2015, fewer boys under age 21 married, and the results indicate that more boys are delaying marriage until their early-to-mid-twenties.

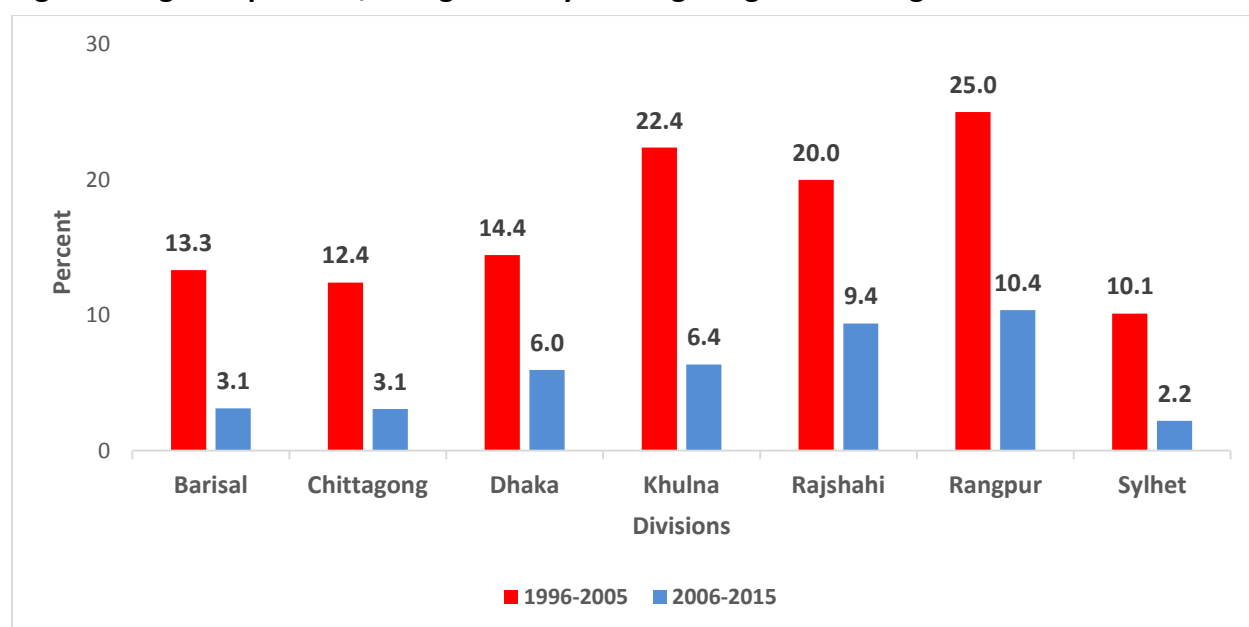
Figure 2 Changes in male age at marriage by age groups from 1996-2005 to 2006-2015



Source: 2015 Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, IFPRI.

Nationally, early marriage has dropped; however, there are regional disparities in trends in early marriage of girls under age 15. Across all divisions, early marriage for girls under age 15 has decreased (Figure 3). In 1996–2005, Rangpur and Khulna Divisions had the leading incidence of early marriage, with 25.0 percent and 22.4 percent, respectively. Although both divisions observed impressive drops in early marriage, the rate decreased by 16 percentage points in Khulna Division (71 percent decline). Interestingly, Sylhet Division has nearly made early marriage among girls obsolete, which dropped from 10.1 to 2.2 percent within one generation.

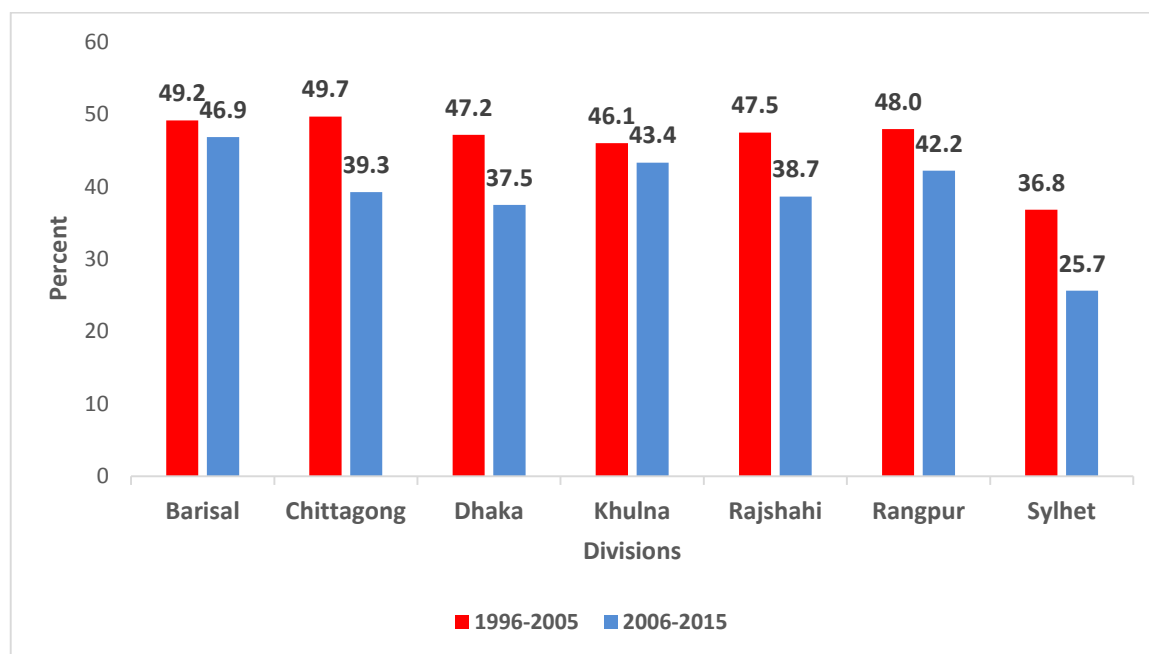
Figure 3 Regional patterns, change in early marriage of girls under age 15



Source: 2015 Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, IFPRI.

Figure 4 shows regional changes in early marriage for girls between ages 15 and less than 18. For this age group, marriage dropped across all divisions for girls aged 15 to less than 18. Sylhet, however, had the greatest drop of any division: from 36.8 percent in 1996–2005 to 25.7 percent in 2006–2015: a 30 percent drop in just two decades.

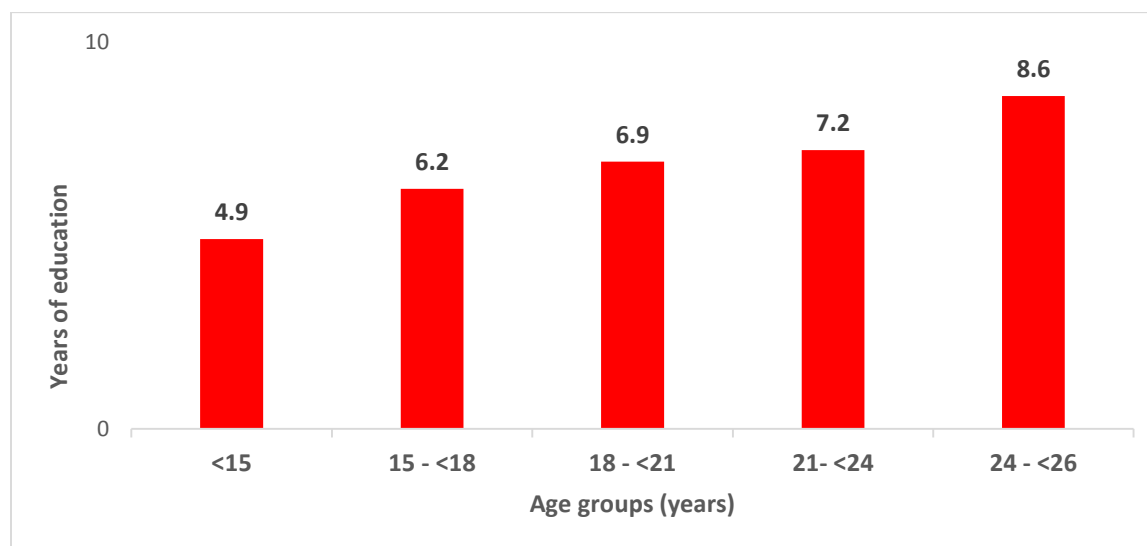
Figure 4 Regional patterns, change in early marriage for girls between ages 15 and <18



Source: 2015 Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, IFPRI.

Figure 5 demonstrates the relationship between girls' age at marriage and years of education. Girls who marry between ages 24 and less than 26 have almost twice the years of education than girls who marry under age 15. Delaying early marriage enables girls to continue education where they otherwise may have to prioritized household and familial responsibilities as a young bride (or mother).

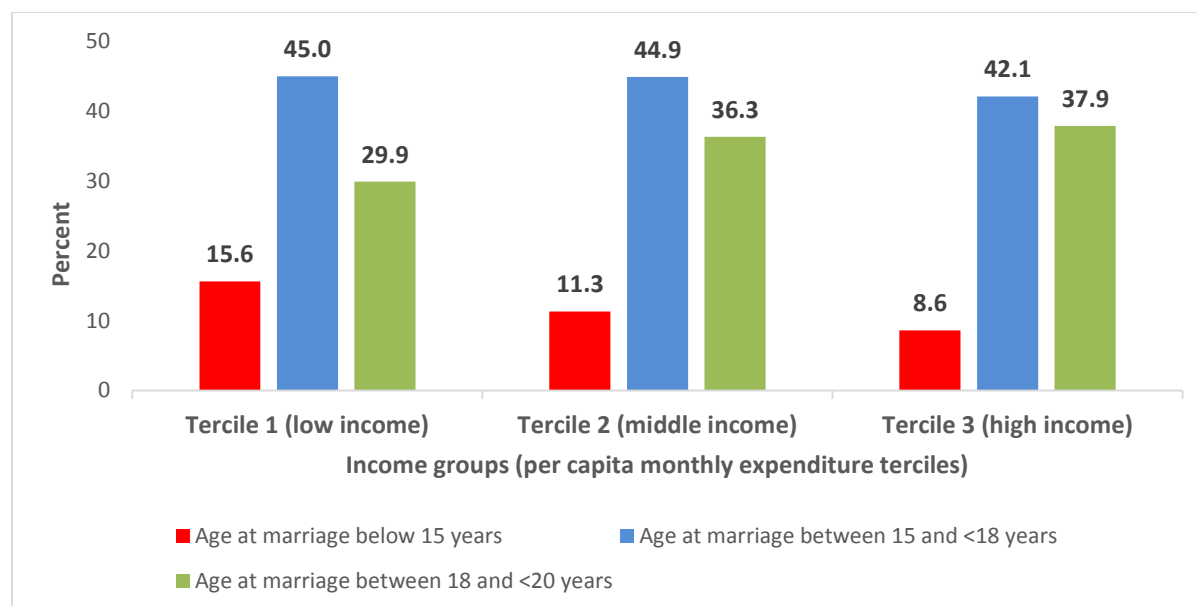
Figure 5 Average years of education and girls' age at marriage: women aged ≤ 30 at the time of survey



Source: 2015 Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, IFPRI.

Figure 6 shows the relationship between income and age at marriage. As income rises, age at marriage tends to increase. Interestingly, age at marriage of under-15 girls is most closely linked to income: 15.6 percent of girls under age 15 come from low income households, compared to only 8.6 percent from the high income tercile. The pattern reverses for girls between ages 18 and less than 20.

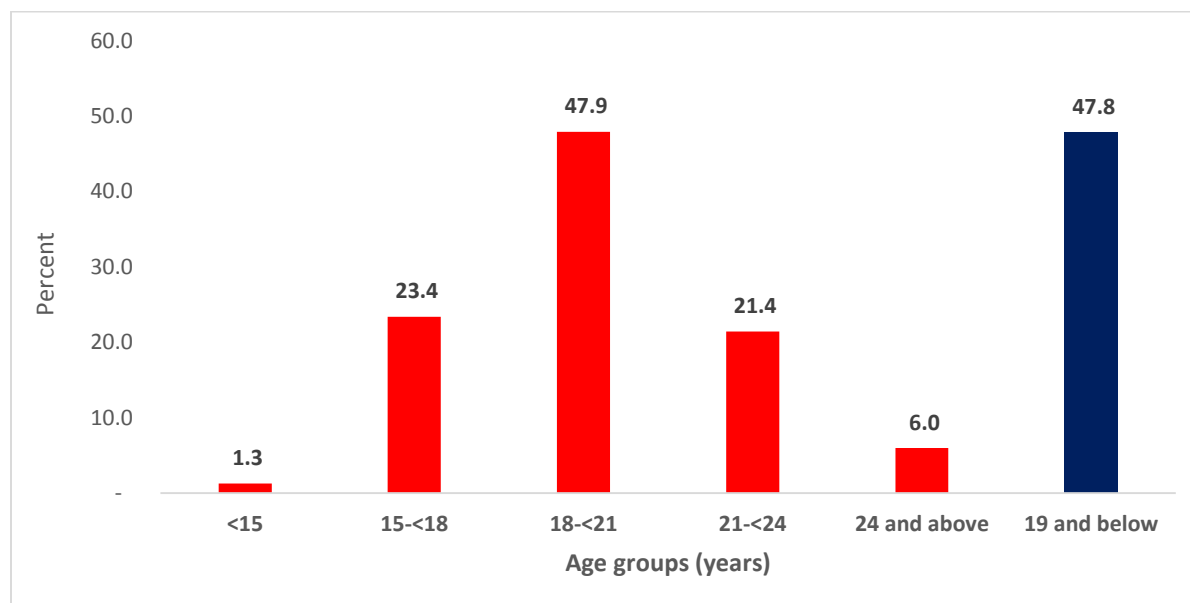
Figure 6 Income and age at marriage: women ages ≤ 30 years at the time of survey



Source: 2015 Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, IFPRI.

Figure 7 shows the distribution of girls' age at first childbirth. About 48 percent of girls had their first child in their teenage years (age 19 and under). It is alarming that nearly one-quarter of women under age 30 in rural Bangladesh gave birth under the legal age of marriage in 2015 – that is, before girls have reached an age of physical and emotional maturity.

Figure 7 Age at first childbirth: women ages ≤ 30 years at the time of survey



Source: 2015 Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, IFPRI.

5. Conclusion

IFPRI's results reinforce Bangladesh's commendable progress in reducing early marriage. Age at marriage for girls under age 15 in rural Bangladesh has declined remarkably over the past two decades. At this rate, the goal of zero incidence of early marriage by 2021 will most likely be achieved. Despite significant decline, 38 percent of girls still marry between ages 15 and 18. Therefore, the other goal of reducing the marriage of girls between ages 15 and 18 by one-third by 2021—to about 13 percent—raises considerable challenges. IFPRI's qualitative research shows that adolescent girls in rural Bangladesh marry early due to social and economic pressures. A massive social campaign on family planning and the risks of early marriage for girls may change behaviors.

In addition, the data highlight a noteworthy incidence of teenage childbirth – nearly 48 percent of girls have their first child before age 19, and nearly one-quarter before the legal age of marriage (age 18). Teenage pregnancy – before the age of physical maturity – increases the risk of birth complications and giving birth to a low-birth-weight baby, which is closely linked to child stunting.

Early marriage warrants further exploration. Using its rich nationally representative dataset, IFPRI plans to conduct further analysis to better understand the underlying factors driving changes in early marriage trends in rural Bangladesh. Although the end of early marriage in rural Bangladesh has yet to be seen, IFPRI's evidence-based research is encouraging: results that show significant

progress in eradicating under-15 marriage suggest that Bangladesh may see corresponding reductions in child stunting and domestic violence, and improvement in gender parity.