

Child marriages have alarmingly increased in Eidgaon and Ukhia Upazila of Cox's Bazar District

A study by COAST Foundation

A recent study has been conducted by COAST Foundation to explore whether child marriages increase during the COVID-19 pandemic in Cox's Bazar District. The result of the study reveals that the highest number of child marriages found in Eidgaon (82%) and Ukhia upazila (75%).

Impact of COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar district

Cox's Bazar is one of the most affected districts in Bangladesh due to COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, the district is experiencing enormous problems due to the influx of around 8 lac forcibly displaced Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. All educational institutions were remained closed since March 2020 to August 2021. As a result, students are passing idle time in the home. Lower income and middle-income families are in serious crisis in terms of small business, shutdown all tourism business and working opportunities. Parents are mostly worried about the children education especially for the safety of girls. Child marriages found significantly increasing due the increase of poverty rate among coastal poor people in all over Bangladesh especially in Cox's Bazar. Many families are found worried about the marriage of their girl children. As a result, child marriage rate has increased notably.

Child marriage trends during COVID-19 pandemic

The survey collects data from 2020 to 2021 where 224 (58%) are female respondents and 160 (42%) are male respondents. The result shows that girls' child marriage rate is higher than boys (girls 53% and boys 23%). Eidgaon has the highest girls' marriage rate (82%). The other upazila that have comparatively higher rate of child marriage are Ukhia Upazila (75%) and Ramu Upazila (72%) respectively. Besides, Teknaf (66%), Moheshkhali (61%), Kutubdia (54%), Cox's Bazar Sadar (51%), Chakaria (32%), and the lowest in Pekua Upazila (26%). Child marriages are mainly increased in the less developed areas. Out of 384 respondents, 243 respondents' families observed the marriage of at least one female member and the rest of the marriages are for male members. Result shows that, the highest rate of boys' child marriage takes

place in Cox's Bazar Sadar, about 39%, followed by Teknaf (38%), and Ukhia (33%). The overall scenario shows that the average age of boys' marriage is 24 years while the girl's marriage is 17 years in Cox's Bazar district. Therefore, it indicates that girl's child marriage has alarmingly increased in the district.

Causes behind child marriage increase

The data analysis shows that 63% respondents reported that child marriage increased in their community during the period of COVID-19 pandemic. 47% respondents reported that child marriage has increased due to school closure. Besides, 26% reported that child marriage increased for economic stress and 22% thinks that parents were bound to commit child marriages due to the loss of job and income decrement.

People who came to prevent child marriage

In responding the question whether any people came forward to prevent child marriage, 55% of the respondents reported that community people were relied on police and Upazila Chairman for child marriage prevention. 39% respondents reported that Union Parishad members and chairman also played important role in preventing child marriage. Besides, 35% respondents think that teachers played significant role, and 32% thinks community people prevented child marriages within their community, and 22% respondents think NGOs actors played effective role in preventing child marriage at community level.

Way forwards recommended by respondents

Responded participated in the survey recommended some way forwards that might reduce child marriage they think. 65% respondents reported that

preventing the production of false birth registration certificate can reduce child marriage and 64% thinks opening of schools and colleges will reduce child marriage, 38% opined to effective implementation of law enforcement system and 32% people recommended to formulate social protection policies to support the girl child poor families. However, 28% said that initiatives such massive social campaign can play role in preventing child marriage at family and community level.

Academic, social and economic status in relation to child marriage

63% marital information have been found for female respondents out of all respondents and in contrast only 37% marital information was found in case of male respondents. The study has showed that average years of education for girls is more than average years of education for boys. Girl's average years of education is class 9 when they get marriage. But the average years of education is class 7 for boys. Result shows that there is a relationship between child marriage and education level of family members. Child marriage rate 5% only for the families who have reported the completion of more than secondary level of education whereas child marriage rate is comparatively higher (35%) in low educational attainment family. The highest child marriage rate (52%) found for the families who do not have formal education or whose literacy level is limited to sign in only. It is found that there is a relationship between family's economic condition and child marriage. According to the economic solvency approximately 51% respondents are from low income family and 44% are from middle class family. However, the study didn't consider their income, nature of house, earning person of family and income source. The highest girls' child marriage are found in low income family (64%). In middle income family, girl's child marriage rate is lower than low-income family and, in case of solvent family, it is lower than middle income family. According to the survey, the child marriage found for middle income family is 32% and solvent family is only 4%.

Survey area and sampling method

This study has been conducted in 9 Upazila of Cox's Bazar district. Data were collected from 32 Unions

and 3 Municipalities (Cox's Bazar, Moheshkhali, and Chakaria Municipality). This study has considered both quantitative and qualitative approach. Both rural and urban scenarios were taken under consideration to draw the real picture of child marriage. Simple random sampling method was applied for the selection of Union and all Upazila were covered under the study. Key Informant Interview (KII) collected from teachers, UP member and chairman, community people, adolescents, and government officials. Focus Groups Discussion (FGD) for this study were not conducted for the study as any public gathering was strictly prohibited during COVID-19 pandemic period in most of the areas in Cox's Bazar. Secondary data were compared from previous research findings. A total of 384 sample were drawn based on the population size where the confidence level determined at 95% margin which limits error level at 5% and confidence interval of 5.

Survey period and surveyors' information

The data for this study were collected in four consecutive days from August 23, 2021 to August 26, 2021. A total of 43 enumerators were involved in this study including 9 team leaders who supervised and guide the other data enumerators. A total of 384 respondents have been interviewed thoroughly taking aspects like age, financial condition, family member, education level, views, opinion into account.

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