

Effects of Covid-19 on Bangladesh's School Dropouts and Child Marriage Rates: A Threat to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals and Promotion of Intergenerational Poverty

Rasel Hussain*, and Tahmina Yesmin Shova†

Abstract

The 2030 deadline for eradicating child marriage set forth in SDG is made challenging by COVID-19. According to UNICEF, Covid-19 increased the likelihood of child marriage for 10 million more girls. The negative effects of the epidemic have increased the probability of child marriage and school dropouts worldwide. After 543 days of closed educational facilities in Bangladesh, particularly schools and colleges, the number of unfilled seats in classrooms revealed a heightened worry about dropouts. Following a qualitative study and review of the literature from Bangladesh, this study explored the trends and impact of covid-19 on the growing number of child marriages and school dropouts, as well as the repercussions of how it jeopardizes the accomplishment of relevant sustainable development objectives. According to this study, child marriage and school dropout rates will in the near future increase the intergenerational poverty rate nationwide.

Keywords: Covid-19, Child Marriage, School dropout, Sustainable development, Bangladesh.

1. Introduction and Background

Wuhan, China, experienced a viral pneumonia pandemic in December 2019, and on December 1 the coronavirus "Patient Zero" was discovered. On January 9, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) publicly declared the COVID-19 corona virus, often known as SARS-Cov2, to be a novel finding. (Coronavirus Illness). Due to its widespread use, the WHO declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020. To prevent the virus's transmission, countries across the world started employing social distancing

* PhD Fellow, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Lingnan University, Hong Kong & Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, East West University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Email: raselhussain@ln.hk

† PhD Fellow, Department of Philosophy, Sheffield University, UK & Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Email: tahminayshova@du.ac.bd

and started to lock down the country which brought an enormous impact on the education system including other sectors as well. According to UNESCO (2020), out of the total enrolled students in 188 countries at all learning levels, 1,576, 021, 818 students in schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) were impacted. Almost after 3 months of covid-19, the first Covid patient in Bangladesh was identified on March 8, 2020. On March 26, 2020, the countrywide general holiday began. From the 17th of March 2020, A total of 543 days of school closure took place till September 12, 2021. The school reopens with both glad (reunion of instructors, students, and parents) and sad news (students missing in almost every class). During the pandemic city people's income fell by 30 percent, while rural dwellers' income fell by 12 percent. Whereas food expenses per person in the city were 65BDT, which was reduced to 54 BDT, and in rural regions, they were 60BDT, which dropped to 53BDT during the early stage of the covid-19 (Prothom Alo, 2021). And all these show a significant part in the occurrences of child marriage and school dropout rates across the country.

The apparent has been proven to be true: a key contributor to child marriage and teenage workforce school dropouts is a crisis-exacerbated surge in home poverty coupled with uncertain job prospects. Indeed, according to UNFPA estimates, economic shocks and the worsening of family poverty are to blame for a substantial part of the global increase in child marriage (UNFPA, 2020). Despite the fact that the legal age of marriage is 18 for women and 21 for men, Bangladesh has South Asia's highest number of child marriages. 38 million of the country's residents married before age eighteen, with another 13 million marrying before age fifteen. According to Save the Children data, Bangladesh is one of 28 countries with a moderate to high school dropout rate because of Covid-19 and long-term school closures (Prothom Alo, 2021). According to government statistics, 231 child weddings took place over the first three months of the shutdown last year, across the nation (March to June), with 61 of them taking place in Kurigram's northern district. The district of Natore had the second-highest number of child weddings, with 23, followed by Jessore and Kushtia, each with 15 apiece. Jhalokati has ten child weddings, Chapainawabganj, Naogaon, and Narsingdi have eight, Cox's Bazar and Gaibandha have seven, Ladhipur and Nilphamari have six, and Rajshahi and Chittagong have five (Haque, 2021). There were 231 reported child weddings in the nation during the first six months of the year (March 2020-June 2020). Between April and October 2020, 138 girls in 21 regions were victims of child marriage, according to a Manusher Jonno Foundation and UNICEF report, with 48 percent of them aged 13 to 15. According to the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE), school attendance plummeted to 60% immediately after the school year began. According to the BRAC

and BSS research, Child marriage flowed by 13%, the highest proportion in 25 years (Haque, 2021).

Against this backdrop, this study is very significant to explore the effect of covid-19 on the increasing rate of child marriage and school dropout rate in Bangladesh which is also connected with and impacting sustainable development growths of the country linked to literacy, women and girls empowerment, child labor and so on.

1.1. Pandemic Challenges, Implications for Institutions and Social Systems

The World Bank (2020) report came up with the prospective immediate challenges and long-term challenges that educational institutes at all levels (Primary to tertiary) are going to confront due to Covid-19.

1.1.1 Immediate Challenges to Confront

Broad-scale institutional disruption is taking place. Illnesses among staff and students necessitate adequate care. Massive student relocating is happening, as is the loss of essential campus services and support. Technical "debt" is escalating. The use of outdated technological platforms impedes even developed and wealthy nations. Modifications are being made to the ways in which coursework, exams, and degrees are awarded. International mobility restrictions, such as the effects on logistics for repatriation or local housing for foreign students and staff, are significantly impacted. Staff and academics are being subjected to furloughs. Repayment of student loans, including deferrals and freezes on payments, has been adversely impacted. The academic, social, economic, and physical equity ramifications for low-income/at-risk students—possibly those with COVID-19 health risks—are on the stack (World Bank, 2020).

1.1.2 Long-term Challenges to Confront

Equality in access and retention has gotten worse as fewer at-risk students return due to rising financial and situational demands such as family duties, changes in personal circumstances, support systems being diminished or destroyed by school closures, etc. Government assistance, private support, household support, company money, and third-party financing in higher education will all be considerably decreased. It is quite likely that irrevocable program and institution closures will occur, resulting in lasting harm to skills and people capital in administrative and academic jobs. Permanently shifting to more applications to digital platforms will want greater help in order to be done successfully. Reduced internal mobility increases the domestic need for education while also raising quality issues. Since global mobility has declined, so have income-generating activities.

The wellbeing of students and academic staff as well as the improvement of interpersonal skills need to be given top priority in environments where there are no direct interpersonal relationships. The decline in higher education's contributions to regional and national civic cultures and communities, including its ability to hold public events, provide ongoing education, and host locations for performing visual arts, etc (World Bank, 2020). Long-term cross-institutional, cross-border, and cross-disciplinary research collaborations will suffer severely.

2. Research questions, objectives, variables, and method of study

This study aims to discover the immediate impact of COVID-19 on the growing rate of child marriages and dropouts from school. And the effects of child marriage and school abandonment, particularly how they endanger the accomplishment of goals connected to sustainable development. In order to address this central research question, the study seeks to focus on the following specific objectives –

1. This paper aims to explore how the education sector is affected during covid-19 outbreak while exploring the status of child marriages and school dropouts in Bangladesh society.
2. This paper also aimed to find out how sustainable development goals are being hampered due to the increased child marriage and school dropouts due to Covid-19.
3. Finally, the research will explore the initiatives taken by the government to halt child marriage and school dropout to establish a sustainable youth force in the country.

In this research child marriage and school dropout are dependent variables whereas Covid-19 is an independent variable. The household level of poverty, parental education status, social status, stigma, taboos, and health crisis are the moderator, mediator, and control variables. Following the qualitative method of study this research aimed to answer the raised research questions and objectives. As secondary sources of data collection, a number of newspaper articles about school dropout and child marriage that were published in 2021 in several national daily newspapers, including but not limited to The Daily Star, Dhaka Tribune, and Prothom Alo, have been gathered. A few local newspapers have also been cited to cross-check the statistics with national dailies. The most trustworthy source was chosen for our reference only after thoroughly comparing the findings of many national sources. The newspaper articles have all documented the process

of school abandonment and the victimization of child marriages during the Covid-19 period.

A systematic review of the content based on secondary data and policy papers detailing Bangladeshi government measures to reduce child marriage and school dropout rates was conducted using a thematic analysis method. No cases of psychological or physical harm have occurred as a result of the careful adherence to ethical standards for human research and secondary data sources, and sources have been properly acknowledged through citation and reference. The victims' names were utilized exactly as they were used by those news publishers because the data for this research mostly came from published news sources.

3. Global Scenario of School Dropouts and Child Marriages

Between 2011 and 2020, 110 million child weddings were expected to have taken place worldwide, with 25 million of those marriages reportedly being averted. However, there is a chance that this tendency will reverse. A maximum of 10 million more girls could be at danger of underage marriage between 2021 and 2030, per UNICEF (UNICEF, 2021). According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Covid-19 epidemic would result in 13 million more child marriages globally between 2020 and 2030. The remaining 5.6 million cases of family poverty can be attributed to the global economic slump, and 7.4 million cases can be attributed to a halt in program implementation (UNFPA, 2020).

UNICEF (2021) estimated that around 2.8 million girls and women in South and West Asia may be unable to return to school. According to the estimation of Save the Children (2020) in 2020, 2 million South Asian girls were at risk of child marriage, with 2.5 million girls be victims by 2025. Following Covid-19, it was estimated that 11 million girls would not return to school (UNESCO, 2020). In Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, 29 percent of female students dropped out, half of whom were pregnant; 34 percent lost parents or guardians; 70 percentage engaged in earnings activities, and an 86 percent of students couldn't afford to go back to school; and 30 percent pregnant female students wanted to return to school. Ghana stopped schools for significant periods of time in 2020, resulting in a dropout rate of 2% of total enrolled pupils, the majority of whom are males from disadvantaged neighborhoods. Repetition rates have risen significantly, between 3.5 percent on average in 2018 and 10.5 percent in 2019. Four times as many children in the poorest wealth quintile drop out of school as those in the richest quintile (4.5%). (0.5 percent). Girls (2%) are somewhat more likely than boys (3%) to leave school early. In the case

of Nairobi and Kenya transactional sex dependency has risen by 49 percent (Abreh et al., 2021).

No difference was statistically significant in the school dropouts for girls and boys in Senegal, despite a grade recurrence that nearly doubled from pre-COVID levels, the dropout rate was only 1.6 percent (rising from 6.3 percent to 11.4 percent). Ten percent of grade 10 females and eight percent of grade 10 boys did not return to Ugandan schools following a six-month break. Even worse, 18% of grade 12 girls did not return, compared to 2% of grade 12 boys. According to UNICEF (2022) study of over 4,000 teens living in urban and rural areas, 16% of vulnerable teenage females and 8% of vulnerable teenage boys did not return to school when Kenyan schools resumed in January 2021.

In Indonesia, the number of child marriages increased from 22,000 in 2019 to over 33,000 in just the first half of 2020 (Inoue, 2022). Child marriage and sexual assault rates have increased by up to 52% in some Indian states. Between April 2020 and March 2021, Telangana, a state in southern India, intervened to prevent 1,355 child marriages, a 27 percent rise from the previous year (Jeleebhoy, 2021; Reliefweb, 2021).

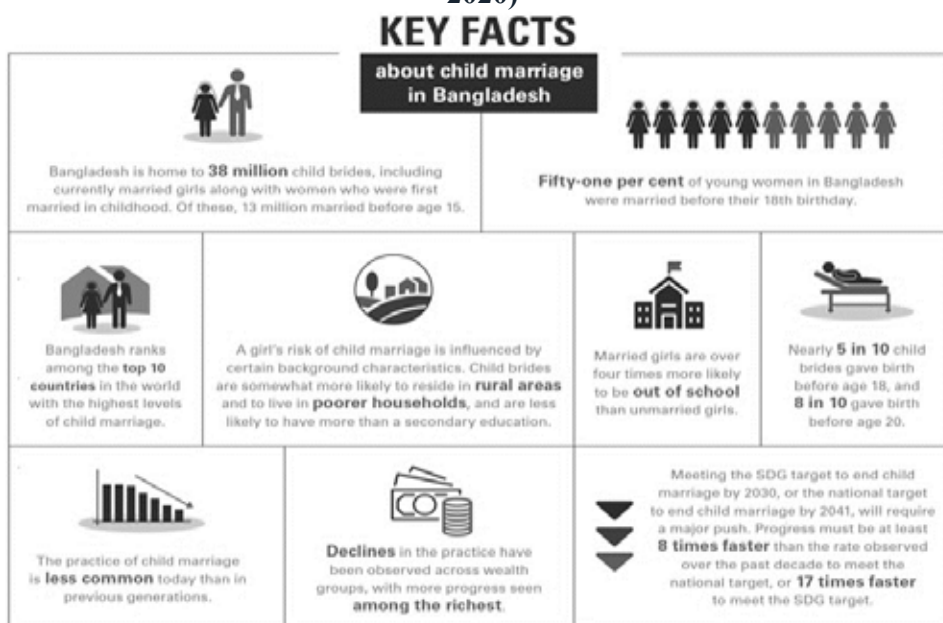
The global level data from various geographical locations made it abundantly evident that while Covid-19 affected practically all countries, the social, cultural, and economic effects varied from one nation to the next. Thus, the school-age children of Africa and Asia suffer the most when it comes to dropping out of school, either because they participate in income-generating activities or because they are victims of child marriage. Thus, Long-term costs must be borne by the nations and victims.

4. Child Marriage and School Dropout Rates in Bangladesh during Covid-19: The Case of Bangladesh

The findings of the study by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) show that, during the fiscal year 2019-2020, 3 crores 24 lac persons were added to the new poor list, of whom 79 lac people were added in the past six months of Covid-19 (Prothom Alo, 2021). The study also stated that the general holiday, lockdown, and social distance measures make people very worried about their livelihood and a lot of people lose their job. Thus, due to poverty and joblessness 28 percent of urban dwellers migrated to the rural areas of whom 18 percent came back afterwards.

Following the discovery of the first covid patient in the country on 8th March and the first reported death on 18th March, the Government of Bangladesh closed all the school colleges on 17th of March 2020. Save the Children data depicts that, the Covid-19 and long-term closure of schools makes Bangladesh, one of 28 nations, having a moderate to high school dropout rate (Prothom Alo, 2021). The students of Bangladesh returned to their classrooms on September 12 after 543 days of school closure caused by the Covid-19 epidemic, one of the world's longest schooling gaps. When classes started, social media was flooded with heart-warming images and videos of kids reuniting, chattering happily as they came into their classrooms, and being greeted by their professors (Tasneem, 2021).

Figure 1: Child marriage- a profile progress in Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2020)



Before the pandemic, it was estimated by UNICEF that, over 100 million girls were at risk of getting married as children., although some countries were very successful in reducing the rate Covid-19 brought that success under threat. Tomoo Hozumi, a UNICEF representative in Bangladesh stated, despite substantial advancements in recent years, child marriage is still a problem in Bangladesh, where the rate is the fourth highest in the world. The challenges that millions of girls' face is made worse by COVID-19. Girls are more likely to be married as children as a result of school closings, being cut off from their peers and social networks.

UNICEF estimated that around 38 million Bangladeshi students have been affected by Covid-19. Despite the government's introduction of TV-based learning programs, the pandemic-related school closures in the country affected roughly 38 million kids (UNB, 2021). Most of the girls were married and some boys started joining the income-generating activities during the Covid-19 lockdown situation. There were 231 child marriages nationally in the first three months of the shutdown of 2021 (March to June), with the majority (61) occurring in Kurigram's northern district. With 23, the Natore district had the second-highest number of child marriages, followed by 15 in each of the Kushtia and Jessore districts. There have also been 10 child marriages in Jhalokati, eight in Naogaon, Chapainawabganj, and Narsingdi, seven in Gaibandha and Cox's Bazar, 6 in Nilphamari and Ladhipur, and 5 in Chittagong and Rajshahi (Haque, 2021).

According to the Manusher Jonno Foundation and Unicef (2021) study, Between April 2020 and October 2020, child marriage affected 138 girls in 21 districts, with 48 percent of them aged 13 to 15. In Bagatipara Upazila of Natore district, in the Perabaria Dakhil Madrasha center out of 98 examinees, 15 Dakhil examinee didn't attempt the test and all of them belongs to Bagatipara Mohila Madrasha thus the Madrasha supers stated that all the girls of his institute got married during covid-19 (Nasim, 2021). In Kurigram, over 50,000 students, or nearly 13% of all students, dropped out, 91 females married, and 20-25% were absent from all schools. In Faridgonj, Chandpur, 81 secondary school certificate examiners-2021 (Male-24, Female-57) with a scientific background (24 males and 57 girls) were absent (Hussain, 2021).

Anindit Roy, Staff members of Save the Children stated,

"Our staff members who work in rural and urban slum areas inform us that child marriage has sharply increased during the epidemic." (Reliefweb,2021).

Villages must now intervene to prevent parents from marrying their daughters, even though they have not seen a single-child marriage in years. As a result of keeping their children at home all day due to job losses, many families feel forced to marry their daughters in order to feed fewer mouths (Reliefweb, 2021).

A few families were able to reduce their living expenditures by marrying off their daughters early as they stated. Furthermore, because everyone is at home and people come and go, sometimes parents marry off their girls early out of fear of scandal and disgrace if they become pregnant. Irene, a 10th-grade student, at Jatrapur Girls High School, Kurigram Sadar upazila stated-

"Our parents viewed us like a burden that needed to be released as soon as possible. We were confined to our homes because we were not allowed to go. Private instruction was not a possibility. We were victims of child marriage despite so many of my friends wanting to study and so many of my friends wanted to study and had high aspirations." (UNB, 2021).

School attendance dropped to 60 percent shortly after school began, according to the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE). According to the BRAC and BSS study, child marriage increased by 13%, the highest percentage in 25 years (Haque, 2021). Nargis Nahar, from Kurigram Sadar Upazila, graduated with eight other female students of Sardob High School from Class 8 in 2020. When she arrived at school, she found that she was the only one there—all the other girls had dropped due to child marriage. According to the principal of her school, three students in the tenth grade, four eighth graders, one-sixth grader, two seventh graders, and one-sixth grader were all married off during the pandemic. Out of the 63 female students that had been registered before the school reopened, just 15 females showed up (Tasneem, 2021). 50 incidents of child marriage also took place in an institute named 'Alipur Union School' in Satkhira district during the school closure period (Prothom Alo, 2021).

Chowdhury Mohiman, manager, of Child Helpline 1098 of UNICEF and BD Government stated that,

"The Child Helpline received 450 calls on child marriage in April of the prior year. We detect a pattern of more attempted child marriages in recent years compared to pre-pandemic days based on the number of requests we currently receive from adolescent females to prevent child marriages." (UNICEF, 2020a).

According to the BANBEIS report, the dropout rate for boys in secondary school has climbed to 36%, while it has grown to 40.19% for girls. Girls aren't the only ones who are at risk. The Daily Star published a photo essay in December 2020 about nine-year-old Nayeem selling cigarette and betel leaves to support his family while the school was closed. (His mother's position as a housekeeper had been lost). The eye-catching image of the cheerful, round-faced youngster working on the streets while he should have been in a class led to Nayeem receiving help from a social organization and enabling him to return to school. Other kids who had to work during the shutdown, especially when the pandemic made their family's situation even worse, experienced something similar? Only 50 of the 162 registered

male students at the Sardob High School in the Kurigram District continued their studies, while the remaining pupils entered the child labor force. Anna Minj, Director, BRAC-CEP opined,

"The rise in child marriage brought on by the pandemic has several factors, including long-term school closures, employment loss in families, and the nation's general economic situation. Furthermore, organizing wedding celebrations during the pandemic is a relatively low-cost option for families. Additionally, the poor mobility of all individuals involved, including officials, keeps those incidents hidden in the pandemic," (Tasneem, 2021).

Guardians and grooms hastened to set up child marriages as a result of the significant number of Bangladeshi migrants who returned home during the pandemic. In order to prevent child marriage and school dropout, school authorities also failed to stay in touch with venerable girl pupils on a regular basis.

All of the aforementioned information and arguments made it abundantly clear that Bangladeshi school-going children, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds who live in urban or rural areas, are the most at risk because their education and well-being could be affected at any time by natural disasters like pandemics, economic upheaval, social unrest, and political unrest, among other things. And they are the ones that suffer and struggle in the never-ending cycle of intergenerational poverty, paying the price generation after generation. They are further forced to live in a socially divided and marginalized state for the duration of their lives by the flawed social system (lack of institutional assistance, bureaucracy, corruption, etc.), as well as by cultural and religious hurdles that prevent them from moving up the social ladder at every stage of their lives.

5. School Dropout and Child Marriage: A Barrier to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

Dropout from school and child marriage is closely connected with a series of crises including literacy, poverty, malnutrition, sexual and reproductive health, child mortality, and other associated goals of sustainable development. Young women's lives are significantly impacted by COVID-19. Due to travel limitations and the physical isolation brought on by the epidemic, girls find it difficult to get the healthcare, social assistance, and support from society they require to prevent child marriage, unintended pregnancy, and sexual assault based on gender. Even when schools are open, married females are more likely to leave their studies and never return. In order to relieve their financial burdens, families may be compelled

by job losses and growing economic instability to marry their daughters and employ their sons. Teenage girls who get married run the danger of both short- and long-term consequences. They are more prone to quit school and become domestic violence victims. The likelihood of an early or unplanned pregnancy increases with child marriage, increasing the risk of maternal illnesses and mortality, because it separates them from their families and friends and prevents them from participating in their communities. The practices has a detrimental impact on the mental health and general wellbeing of girls.

Figure 2: Covid-19 a stumbling block of sustainable development and possible way out

	Impact (Children & Parents)	Consequence	Students stands to lose	Threats to SDGS	SDG hampered	Remedies
Covid-19	a) School closure	Child marriage	Education	a) Increase illiteracy	4	a) Reopen schools
	b) Economic stress			b) Universal primary education disruption		3 5 16
	c) Service disruption	School Dropouts	Health	a) Early and unplanned Pregnancy	2,5 8,9 10,12	
	d) Unplanned pregnancy			b) Maternal complications and mortality		d) Creation of job sector
	e) Parental death due to pregnancy			c) Isolate Girls and boys from Family and Friends		e) Address the education, economic, social and health needs.
	f) Unemployment and joblessness			d) Exclude from participating in communities		f) Uphold human rights
	g) Isolation from peers and support networks	Engagement in Earning by boys (Child labour)	Prospects	e) Toll on mental health and well being	3,16	g) Consult girls and guardians during the full cycle of preparedness, risk mitigation and response
	h) Fear of violence		Services	f) Domestic violence and depression		h) Ensure equitable access
			a) Social stigma and Trauma			
			b) Raising poverty and Economic insecurity			
			c) Job crisis, Unemployment and Food insecurity			
			d) Exacerbated gender inequalities			
			Access to health care, social service, community support			

Source: Developed by Authors

The reaction to Covid-19 has significant ramifications for girls and women. Lockdowns have rendered many men unemployed and, as a result, at home throughout the day, making various demands. Women are under increasing pressure to make more meals, clean up after themselves, and manage their homes. Financial stress increases domestic stress and increases the chance of violence, particularly when husbands ask wives' families for more money, which is a major contributor to domestic violence. To achieve such a cultural transition, girls and women must be economically empowered as well as socially empowered (UN Women, 2021; World Bank, 2021; WHO, 2021). There is a requirement of practical abilities including goal-setting, cooperation, and decision-making, among others. In order for girls and women to have access to the job market and be able to support themselves,

for occupational skill training is necessary. There is also a need for mentorship in order for women to see a future in which they need microfinance in the form of loans. Girls and women, according to Covid-19, need to be able to imagine a bright future for themselves. The world must become aware of this knowledge in order to defeat Covid-19. For the rest of the world, Covid-19 should act as motivation to support women and girls in achieving a future free from gender-based violence (Bani, 2021). But due to child marriage and school dropouts, all of the boys' and girls', prospects and possibilities are just being buried and they become the victim of the vicious cycle of poverty, malnutrition, hunger, illiteracy, health crisis, domestic violence, and so on. All these young people forces who already dropped out and got married in the meantime are the future fathers and mothers and thus their future children's life will also be at stake. The vicious cycle of poverty will haunt them throughout their life. And all of these have a long-term negative impact on the road to sustainable development of the country.

6. Initiatives Taken by the Bangladesh Government to Hold Back School Dropouts and Child Marriages

To encourage children to return to school, the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) recommends improving monitoring methods, re-enrolment campaigns that include participatory community activities, and an awareness program. Covid-19 responses and recovery plans have been prepared with a budget of 768 crores, 11 percent of which will go towards student evaluation and teacher training. By 2023, the government plans to have boosted stipends and arrange daily school lunches for 1.4 million government primary schools. Government authorities pushed schools to utilize ministries to persuade married girls to return to school. To avoid the use of fake age documents, a digital birth registration system has been developed, ensuring that no one marries before the age of 18. Under the Vulnerable Persons Act, the government increased food and cash aid by 10%. In the meantime, the government increased food and cash support by 10% under Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), one of Bangladesh's primary safety net programs designed to reduce people's vulnerability so that they don't marry off their underage children and halt their schooling (Prothom Alo, 2021, Tasneem, 2021; Sakib, 2021).

7. Fighting Child Marriages and School Dropouts with the Revision of Curriculum and Textbook

Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia, despite the fact that the marriage age is 18 for women and 21 for men. Of the 167 million people who call the country home, 38 million got married

before the age of 18, with 13 million getting married as early as fifteen. Bangladesh would update its educational program and include a new course on reproductive health, citing the data as a significant cause for concern as the nation struggles with the highest rate of child marriage in more than two decades.

The state minister for primary and mass education, Md. Zakir Hossain, announced in December that the government will develop a new curriculum to address the problem of child marriage. According to Nazma Sheikh, deputy secretary for basic and mass education, the new curriculum is being updated. In January 2023, it will go into effect (Dhar, 021).

By 2041, the Bangladeshi government intends to have outlawed child marriage, according to board members for basic education Prof. Dr. A. K. M. Riajul Hasan and Prof. Syed Mahfuj Ali. It released its National Prevention Action Plan in 2018. In order to increase awareness of issues including child marriage, adolescent health, mental health, and other issues. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board decided to make the new subject, "Health Safety," compulsory. Despite being presented to younger children, the subject will first be taught to secondary school students in grades six through 10. They also wish to incorporate child marriage awareness issues into the fifth-grade curriculum in view of the present scenario (Sumon, 2021).

Generation Breakthrough (GB) was a three-year experimental program run by the board in the districts of Barguna, Barishal, and Patuakhali. Prof. Syed Mahfuj Ali stated,

“In the Southern regions child marriage rates are among the highest in the country, and the results of the GB experimental program are positive. The first priority is to end child marriage in the nation, and nothing can stop accomplishing this goal.” (Arab News, 2021).

In certain areas, the GB initiative had a good impact on the number of underage marriages." We'll start incorporating this curriculum into textbooks nationwide starting in 2023. We'll also talk to youngsters about issues with reproductive health that have been mostly disregarded for years due to social stigma. He claims that the updated curriculum seeks to make sure "education has greater practical value.

The government has printed two emergency toll-free numbers — 333 and 109 — on the back covers of all textbooks for the new academic year, which starts in January 2022, so that students can ask for help regarding the abuse

of women and children and other pertinent crises they face in their daily lives (Sumon, 2021). In order to enable students, to seek assistance in preventing child marriage, the government is also thinking of establishing a national emergency hotline starting in the subsequent academic year 2023. A significant amount of school dropouts can also be remedied by stopping child marriages.

8. Recommendations and Call for Policy Formulation

Some recommendations and policy suggestions are made in this vein considering the aforementioned facts and keeping track of sustainable development. If these recommendations are put into practice, the country's efforts to prevent school dropouts and child marriages will be greatly aided. First of all, because most girls and boys are dropping out of educational institutes owing to financial difficulties, economic incentives from the government and non-governmental organizations are required to encourage girls and boys not to marry and to continue their studies.

Secondly, as part of safety net services, more and more poverty reduction measures must be implemented. It is critical to protect females' right to schooling, which must be enacted. Remote learning access must be controlled, and students who drop out must be made mentally prepared to return to school. Teachers and caregivers must be provided with digital packs and training in order to properly use education technology offline and online and ensure that students gain the most. A hotline-based educational campaign may be pushed throughout the country.

Thirdly, investing in girls' education, psychological support, and sexual and reproductive health care, should be increased regardless of marital status. During the whole cycle of readiness, risk mitigation, and response, consultation with girls, boys, and women must be improved. Donors and government agencies should expand and make more flexible support for civil society organizations. Girl students who marry and become pregnant must have entry to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services so that they do not suffer from malnutrition and other health problems in the long term.

Fourthly, the usage of social media and internet access for educational reasons must be encouraged. Data collection must be maintained to follow dropout and child marriage victims so that maximum assistance can be delivered over a long period of time, and community participation will play a vital role in making this happen. Finally, creating a supportive

environment from a social, psychological, and economic standpoint will assist them and the country in ensuring the youth's long-term growth.

Fifthly, the call for policy might be regarding those in the school who already drop out. Bangladesh has a large informal sector (85 percent), thus developing skills through informal vocational education arrangements can be worth making school dropouts to be productive and integrated into the labour market. And those who want to get back to school sometimes also become the victim of stigma and other taboos that also exist in the social system. Thus, getting back school dropouts (Boys or girls) needed to be handled with great care so they do not experience stigma and easily overcome the taboos.

Finally, the most important task to overcome the crisis is to develop partnerships with the government involving civil society, NGOs, INGO, and other relevant agencies to combat the crisis efficiently and effectively. Being a religion-dominated country, the involvement of religious leaders is very essential. Since they belong to the heart of the community they can make the people aware of the negative impacts of child marriages and enlighten the masses about the positive impacts of being educated and its long-term impact on the individual, family, society, and the country as well.

9. Concluding Remarks

COVID-19 wreaked havoc on the world's economic, political, social, cultural, and educational systems. The global rates of child marriage and schooling have both been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic. The rates of child marriage and school dropout have increased in many nations, including Bangladesh, as a result of schools being forced to close and economic challenges affecting families globally. Bangladesh, which has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, has been rendered even worse by the pandemic. After COVID-19, many females quit going to school as a result of financial issues. Due to the effects of COVID-19, Bangladeshi schoolgirls experience enormous pressure to get married young both during and after the event. Girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys, and the country's rate of school attendance has fallen since the outbreak of the epidemic. Bangladesh's child marriage and school dropout epidemics demand immediate, comprehensive community remedies. The nation needs to make more major efforts to raise awareness. Government and non-governmental groups must work more to raise awareness among families, encourage girls' access to school and employment possibilities, and reinforce policies that forbid child marriage.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on Bangladesh's experience with child marriage and school abandonment have significant implications for sustainable development. Prioritizing investments in gender equality and women's empowerment as well as addressing the root causes of child marriage and gender-based injustices are essential if we are to create a society that is more just and equitable. Since we are living in a high-risk era with multidimensional uncertainties, now is the time to develop a sustainable and affordable management system across the educational system, as well as other arenas, to mitigate the crisis in the future, so that all the school going little flowers bloom well and contribute to the world's sustainable development.

Future research might focus on COVID-19's long-term implications on child marriage and dropout rates. Additionally, the post-Covid-19 status of those victims of child marriage and school dropouts' lives can be monitored in order to determine their level of livelihood, which can then be linked to and assessed in relation to sustainable development goals.

References

- Arab News (2021, December 31). Bangladesh looks to curb child marriage with school curriculum overhaul. *Arab News*. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1996121/world>
- Abreh, M., Agbevanu, W., Alhassan, A., Ansah, F., Bosu, R., Crawford, L., . . . Nyame, G. (2021). What happened to dropout rates after COVID- 19 school closures in Ghana. *CDG Blog*. <https://www.cdgdev.org/blog/what-happened-dropout-rates-after-covid-19-school-closures-ghana>
- Bani, S. B. (2021, January 4). The impact of Covid-19 on child marriage and other gender-based violence. *The Daily star*. Dhaka, Bangladesh. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/the-impact-covid-19-child-marriage-and-other-gender-based-violence-2021813>
- Christina Kwauk, D. S., Erin Ganju. (2021). What do we know about the effects of COVID-19 on girls' return to school? *Brookings Education Blog*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2021/09/22/what-do-we-know-about-the-effects-of-covid-19-on-girls-return-to-school/>
- Dhar, S. (2021, November 18). District-wise Literacy Performance. *Daily Sun*. <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/588596/Districtwise-Literacy-Performance->

- Haque, N. T. (2021). Child marriage up 13% during Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. *Dhaka Tribune*, 2021, March 28. *Dhaka, Bangladesh*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2021/03/28/child-marriage-up-13-during-covid-19-pandemic-in-bangladesh>
- Hossain, I. (2021, September 15). School closure: 50,000 students may have dropped out in Kurigram. *Dhaka Tribune*. *Dhaka, Bangladesh* <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/09/15/school-closure-kurigram-may-have-lost-50k-students>
- Hussain, M. (2021, November 14). 81 science group students examinee were absent in SSC and same level in Faridganj. *Hilsha News*. <https://hilshanews.com/ফরিদগঞ্জ-এসএসসি-পরীক্ষা/?fbclid=IwAR2vLaYRiISywjZgpz20s6tMZJJTaRcyXXcSS7-IsBdmyZbyccPaMMehBp8>
- Inoue, K. (2022, January 2). Child Marriages in Asia rise as COVID drives more into poverty. *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Child-marriages-in-Asia-rise-as-COVID-drives-more-into-poverty>
- Jejeebhoy, S. (2021). Child Marriages During the Pandemic. *The India Forum*. <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/child-marriages-during-pandemic>
- News24bd (2021, November 20). All the students got married, none joined the exam. *News24bd.com*. <https://www.news24bd.tv/details/84698/বিয়ে-হয়ে-গেছে-সব-শিক্ষার্থীর-পরীক্ষায়-অংশ-নেয়নি-কেউই?fbclid=IwAR0zzfBDcXJ9QBEP3TQjfsjXgcaOEJ0lxyYFVhkT-4cEZpuNhCjnJg9kl0c>
- Prothom Alo (November 4, 2021). 3crores 24 lacks new poor during Covid-19. *Prothom Alo*. https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/coronavirus/করোনাকালে-নতুন-দরিদ্র-৩-কোটি-২৪-লাখ-মানুষ?fbclid=IwAR0CD4Tggee2JPIjc5NuGTuZ_WZpB68sXiFQFgU7dr6RQAfFFPEJFJxORuY
- Reliefweb (2021). India: Girls in India facing greater online risk of child marriage and trafficking during pandemic. *Reliefweb*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/india/india-girls-india-facing-greater-online-risk-child-marriage-and-trafficking-during>
- Save the Children (2020). *Covid-19 places half a million more girls at risk of child marriage in 2020*. <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/covid-19-places-half-million-more-girls-risk-child-marriage-2020>
- Sakib, S. N. (2021). *Bangladesh: Child marriage rises manifold in pandemic*. Life Asia Pacific. Anadolu Agency.

- Sumon, S. (2021, December 31). Bangladesh looks to curb child marriage with school curriculum overhaul. *Arab News*. <https://arab.news/zkdhv>
- Tasneem, S. (2021, September 22). The empty seats in our classrooms. What can we do to ensure that school dropouts don't increase as a result of the pandemic? *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/the-empty-seats-our-classrooms-2181076>
- UN Women (2020). COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. *UN Women* <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>
- UNB (2021). Education Minister: Still unsure about number of dropouts. *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/education/2021/10/30/education-minister-still-unsure-about-number-of-dropped-out-students>
- UNFPA (2020). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family planning and ending gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and child marriage. *United Nations Population Fund*.
- UNICEF (2020). Ending child marriage: a profile of progress in Bangladesh. *New York: United Nations Children's Fund*.
- UNICEF (2020a). Pandemic-induced poverty pushing up child marriage. Reported cases of child marriage received by Child Helpline 1098 increased. Available from <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/stories/pandemic-induced-povertypushing-child-marriage>
- UNICEF (2021). *10 million additional girls at risk of child marriage due to COVID-19*. <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/10-million-additional-girls-risk-child-marriage-due-covid-19-unicef>
- UNICEF (2022). With 23 countries yet to fully reopen schools, education risks becoming 'greatest divider' as COVID-19 pandemic enters third year – Number of children dropping out of school poised to increase, emerging evidence shows. <https://www.unicef.org/eap/press-releases/23-countries-yet-fully-reopen-schools-education-risks-becoming-greatest-divider>
- UNESCO (2020). 11 million girls may not return to school. <https://gdc.unicef.org/resource/11-million-girls-may-not-return-school>

WHO (2021). Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women. Executive summary. *World Health Organization*.

World Bank. (2020). *World Bank Group Education Report*. World Bank.