

Teen Brides, Migrant Husbands and Religious Schooling: an Analysis of Young Women's Experiences of Marriage and Schooling in Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract

In many Muslim communities across South Asia, children and adolescents access education through religious institutions such as madrassa. When analysing the impact of madrassa on gender equity and empowerment, many scholars downplay feminist criticism of these institutions on the basis that even non-religious schools promote traditional gender roles in the global south. Some research on Bangladesh explains that 'modernised' or government-recognised madrassa, where students learn secular academic topics in addition to Arabic and Quranic verses, help boost female educational attainment in conservative communities. In addition, scholars often resist criticism of madrassa and other local practices such as early marriage in the name of understanding non-Western norms and ideals. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in remote villages of northern Bangladesh, this paper analyses the impact of religious schooling on young women's everyday lives and perspectives through the experiences of young brides who are married to labour migrant men. Some of these brides have attended secular school while others have attended traditional madrassa, and I attempt to understand how their educational backgrounds have informed their views on marriage and gender roles. In this article, I contest the claim that religious schooling and early marriage can facilitate rural women's agency. I argue that advocating for modernised madrassa is problematic, unless the conflicting impacts of unrecognised/traditional madrassa on women's agency are acknowledged.

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Madrassa education and early marriage for female teens are largely entangled in the remote areas of Bangladesh. Evidence from Bangladesh suggests that *madrassa* strengthens traditional values in young men and women where boys are preferred and supported both for higher education and employment, while girls play a home-making role (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2010; Raynor, 2005). In Pakistan, female *madrassa* students are taught to believe in ‘women will get married, women will raise children and it will create a norm in the society over time’ (Conway, 2011). However, few scholars have argued that a modernised form of *madrassa* (known as *aliya madrassa*), where students also learn some marketable skills other than Arabic studies, have been successful in attracting female students. Modernised or government-recognised *madrassas* are strongly associated with the boom in female schooling in Bangladesh (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2009). In this article, I will argue that advocating for modernised *madrassas* for their role in increasing numbers of female students can mask the perilous impact of traditional *madrassas* on women’s agency in rural Bangladesh.

Another form of informal Islamic schooling for women is known as Quran reading classes or groups. Maddox (2005, p.128) claims that in Bangladesh, in terms of women’s status within the community the ability to memorise and read sections of the Quran were clearly significant. Bledsoe and Robey’s (1993) research from Sierra Leone suggests that understanding the Quranic texts could allow its reader a powerful form of knowledge that can be used to create agency. Maddox (2005) further claims that this point has often been made by feminist scholars (Hartmann, 1983; White, 1992; Kabeer, 1989; Kabeer, 1994) who argue that women’s knowledge of the Quran and Hadith is an essential factor in gender relations and women’s ability to resist ‘false’ interpretations and patriarchal relations. This scholarship can be debatable since anti-feminist interpretation and understanding of Quran is also prevalent. For example, in Bangladeshi villages, Quran literacy is deemed an essential requirement for a good wife

skilled in a non-questioning acceptance (Asadullah et al., 2019). This paper aims to contribute to this debate, and questions the perception that *madrassa* or religious schooling can empower rural young women in Bangladesh.

Although education and economic opportunities for women in South Asia are more accessible now than before, the deeply rooted traditional rationalisations for early marriage are not likely to disappear soon. Moreover, families are often caught between status fulfilment through ideal gender performance where modesty, segregation and early marriage are admired; and modernity, where greater education and marriage at a later age are emphasised (Desai and Andrist, 2010). Nazneen (2018) pointed out how binary framings place Bangladeshi women at opposing ends by demarcating them as ‘Muslim/religious/moral/authentic/traditional’ or ‘Bengali/secular/immoral/Westernised/ modern’. This article is an attempt to stress that both *madrassa* education and early marriage strengthen rural Bangladeshi women’s traditional and religious roles and curtail their general sense of wellbeing and freedom.

Another branch of literature (Chowdhury, 2009; Chatterjee, 2011; Kamal et al., 2014) has argued that early marriage in South Asia allows women to fulfil sexual and emotional needs because romantic affairs and sex before marriage are taboos in rural and traditional contexts. While I do not entirely diverge from this view, it is also problematic in a sense that women in such contexts have to sacrifice education and economic opportunity to fulfil their romantic desires by entering into marriage at an early age. In this paper, I argue that safeguarding traditional practices (such as early marriage) in the name of understanding ‘local’ culture can neglect the disrupted experiences of young brides. As Tadros and Khan (2018, p. 3) have rightly pointed out, some feminist scholarship (Mahmood, 2011; Abu Lughod, 2013) produced in the West could

accidentally serve to establish the power base of local parties with agendas to restrict the rights of women and vilify the advocates for gender justice – in the name of resisting imperialism.

The narratives presented in this paper are the voices of the teen brides who are married to labour migrant men. Labour migration is a livelihood strategy for a significantly large group of an impoverished population from Bangladesh. The destination countries for labour migrants are primarily the countries in Middle East and in Southeast Asia (Ahmed et al., 2015; Kibria, 2011). Unlike the educated middle-class who are allowed to migrate with their families (often to Western nations), labour migrants cannot bring their spouses to the country where they work and reside (Rudnick, 2009). Bangladesh is also home to 38 million child brides (UNICEF, 2020), which implies that the labour migrants often leave behind young wives. The legal age for marriage is 21 for boys and 18 for girls in Bangladesh (Zahangir and Nahar, 2021), yet parents often secretly arrange marriages for their daughters who are under 18. While the circumstances of left-behind families have attracted much research focus from Bangladesh and beyond, there has not been much dialog on the impact of labour migration on practices such as child marriage. I aim to address this specific gap in the literature concerned with labour migration and gender. I do so by detailing the accounts of the teen brides on marriage and education. I suggest that motivations toward education can remarkably differ among the brides, contingent on whether they attended religious or non-religious schools. I discuss a brief background of the study villages and methods next.

Methods, positionality and description of the study villages:

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2017 in four villages of a northern district *Bogura* in Bangladesh for my doctoral research. I conducted interviews and participant observation of the everyday life of migrant and a few non-migrant families. Participant

observation permits researchers to inspect definitions of terms that participants use in interviews, observe events that informants may be unable or unwilling to share (Marshall & Rossman 1995, p. 85).

My status as an urban middle-class woman with experience of living and studying abroad, puts me in an outsider box to the villagers, even though I maintain a personal contact (with a relative) in one of the villages.

Although I was perceived as an outsider, my traditional Bangladeshi attire and ability to speak in Bengali made it easy for my participants to engage in conversation with me. Also, identifying myself as too similar to my research participants could have created the problem of 'over rapport' (Perriton, 2000). There are no expectations of the researcher and the researched to be a homogenous group (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). Following Luff (1999), Nazneen and Sultan (2014) have indicated that current discussion on methodologies and empowerment research needs to move beyond the usual reflexive practices and positionality and should focus on how the research processes can be made less traumatic for researchers where they engage with non-feminist groups that have strong views against women's equality. This view reflects part of my experience in the villages, where the participants share conservative attitudes towards women's public and private roles.

The villages are between one and one-and-a-half kilometres apart from each other. It is apparent from the interviews and participant observations that men from these villages largely work in agriculture and those who are not working in the fields, are labour migrants abroad. Majority of the women stay at home and child marriage is widely common in the villages. My interview with the local government representative (designated as member in villages) reveals the lack of enforcement of laws prohibiting child marriage. As the member said:

The government put a lot of pressure on us to prevent child marriage. But villagers really don't want to follow. They conduct early marriages for their daughters in the night. Often, they put false ages on the marriage certificates for their daughters. They even invite me to attend such marriage. I do not go!

The Islamist leader (if not the village imam) has a strong influence on the beliefs of villagers. One of the local non-migrant men explains:

We do not get enough help either from the government or from the NGOs. We do not go to NGOs for help or for money, because huzuur (local Islamic leader) has mentioned NGOs are run by the Jews and we should not ask for help and money from them.

To understand the power structure in the villages, I questioned a few villagers regarding their emergency contacts during an imminent crisis. They informed me it would depend on the nature of the issue. For example, a religious leader cannot solve a problem that requires police involvement. If there is any dispute in everyday life that requires Islamic teaching to resolve such as divorce or calls for Islamic solutions to mitigate issues between husbands and wives, the villagers seek helps from the imams. However, the neighbours play most crucial roles in mitigating issues between spouses, or any other family dispute. Neighbours are often called upon, but they often can simply turn up and intervene when aware of a family dispute next door. If neighbours are unable to solve the problem, the member (government representative) is called upon. In regard to serious crimes such as murder or a fight between men, the villagers seek help from the police.

Now, I turn to the experience of teen brides of migrants who studied in secular school.

Teen brides who attended secular school

The majority of brides enrolled in secular institute expressed their despair on the termination of their education. The young brides who had a strong desire to continue their studies usually lacked power or provision to go against husbands and their families' decisions. For example, 19-year-old Mim from Harvanga village was married to a migrant man when she was 16 and studying in tenth standard at a high school. Her husband was in Saudi Arabia and their marriage was conducted on phone. She shared her experience:

Marzana: *You studied until tenth standard! That's great!*

Mim: *But my wish wasn't fulfilled! He (husband) didn't allow me to study. Before marriage they (parents-in-law) said they will let me study. That's why I agreed to the marriage. I thought it might be a good opportunity that my husband won't be here and as a married girl I will be continuing my study. People will not gossip about me. But after marriage, he didn't keep his promise.*

In impoverished Bangladeshi communities, parents are always concerned about the physical security of their teenage daughters. Young girls are regularly subjected to harassment from local men, which threatens the safety of many families. However, married young girls attract less attention from the local youth. Chowdhury's (2004, p. 250) empirical evidence from a Bangladeshi village shows that parents of young girls prefer early marriages for their daughters because once married they are not so afraid of gender-based violence that includes stalking and rape in severe cases. Due to such contexts, young girls and their parents consider that the status of a 'married girl' will facilitate a girl's physical movement or provide societal protection to her.

Therefore, Mim hoped that as a married girl, she would find her commute to school attracting less unwanted attention from local men and she would encounter less problems in relation to her physical movements. She also expected to obtain a better focus on education without the usual distractions for a wife who resides with husband. However, her migrant husband and his family put an end to her education after marriage. This is despite the fact that before marriage, her husband promised that he would allow her to study. It may seem unfair, but Mim was not necessarily upset with her husband for changing his mind after marriage. She might be feeling dismay, but her words conveyed respect for her husband. She said:

He (husband) tried nicely to convince me *'Shundor kore bolse'*. He said: *'There's no point for you to continue your study. You are married now. You don't need any education. And people will still gossip if you continue and I might get angry with you then. Better you stay home. You stay at my parents' place or stay with your parents. Stay happy with them, you don't need to study.'*

She used words 'nicely' and 'convince', *'Shundor kore'* to indicate that her husband did not force her, but rather convinced her to quit education. However, comments from her husband such as 'people will gossip' if she continued study – and that would make him angry at her – implies that even a married girl will not necessarily escape 'people gossiping about her' or unwanted attention from the locals.

A number of villagers seem to uphold a mistaken point of view that young bride would be able to continue her study if the groom is a migrant man who stays abroad. Parents of the teenage girls often arrange their daughters' marriage with migrant men, anticipating that new brides could continue study after marriage without much distraction while their husbands work abroad. Rabeya, a 34-year-old from Bagichapara village, stated:

We got our daughter married when she was in fifth grade. Our son-in-law was in Dubai that time. We got her married thinking that she will continue study even after marriage. The marriage was done on phone/skype. That is why we got her married early, thinking that son-in-law would stay abroad for more five years and my daughter would continue her study during that period. But our son-in-law had to come back from Dubai just after one year of the marriage.

19-year-old Tahida, married to a migrant man in Harinmara village, shares a similar experience. Tahida is the only girl among the left-behind wives I interviewed from the villages who studied until her first year of college.

Marzana: *You went on studying till college! But you didn't continue it?*

Tahida: *No, I didn't continue my college. My parents-in-law do not like the idea of me going to college; my parents wanted me to study and so do I. My parents thought that after marriage my parents-in-law will help me with continuing my education. But the environment here is not like that. They (parents-in-law) do not like it that their daughter-in-law goes out of the house every day and moves around.*

In the above two cases, parents of the teenage daughters assumed that marriage to migrant men would not affect their daughters' ongoing education. While due to the unsuccessful migration (unexpected early return from Dubai) of Rabeya's son-in-law, Rabeya's daughter in fifth grade had to leave education; Tahida had to end her education following the commands of her parents-in-law. However, the non-confrontational attitudes of the parents toward their daughters' husbands (and parents-in-law) suggest that the parents of brides also emphasise marriage over education for their daughters. Furthermore, this can indicate that in these villages, the parents of teenage brides do not necessarily arrange

marriages for their daughters with migrant men in order to facilitate the education of their daughters. The ultimate goal is to finalise their daughters' marriage, regardless of whether the future sons-in-law are migrant or non-migrant men.

The husband's migration does not change a teen bride's responsibilities towards her families-in-law

Due to their newly married status, teen brides often choose to leave education reluctantly, even if they are not overtly coerced into doing so by the parents-in-law. Amina, an 18-year-old from Harinmara village, studied until tenth standard and was given in marriage to her husband when he returned to the village for a short break from Saudi Arabia. Amina's marriage was conducted before her final exam and after marriage she could not to take her exam, although her husband left for Saudi Arabia immediately afterwards. She stays with his parents, who are a joint family with other extended family members.

***Marzana:** Did your husband or his parents influence your decision to not sit for the exam?*

***Amina:** Um...No. It was my wish not to continue study.*

***Marzana:** Why did you decide to do so?*

***Amina:** (long pause) Now... you see, after marriage one is not motivated enough for education. If I had been given the exam, my results would not have been good. And this would have made me upset. That's why I did not take the exam. Now, there is a lot of housekeeping to do. It is not possible to skip these duties and manage time to study. And after marriage a lot of new relatives (more extended family members of husband) come to see me. It is a busy time.*

Though it was not Amina's deliberate choice to terminate education, she emphasised the point that she was not forced by her husband or his parents. Amina also made it clear that her desire for education was hampered by marriage and the newly imposed role as a new bride. The context of a newly married bride – new duties as daughter-in-law, meeting with new relatives – certainly remains the same for a bride whether she is married to a migrant or a non-migrant man. Similar to every married girl in the village, Amina's priorities are now fulfilling new roles at the home of her parents-in-law and maintaining her status as a good daughter-in-law and wife.

Teen brides who attended *madrassa*

15-year-old Sauda from Bagichapara village was given in marriage when she was 14; her husband stays in Qatar. Since marriage, she stopped going to *madrassa*. In her words:

Sauda: They (husband and his parents) didn't want me to continue study. I also didn't want to study.

Marzana: Why didn't you want to study anymore?

Sauda: After marriage, girls need to focus on housekeeping, right? I am good at study also. But if I continue study, I can't focus at home, I have to focus on study then. But my mother-in-law is alone. My father-in-law is also abroad. That's why I don't want to continue study. I want to learn the household work (cooking, cleaning) so that I can help my mother-in-law.

Sauda's parents-in-law are not a large extended joint family like Amina's. Both Sauda's husband and father-in-law are abroad; and only her mother-in-law and a younger brother-in-law currently reside at home. At this early age Sauda has learned to appreciate the norm that once married, she should dedicate herself serving her husband's parents. Hence, whether it is

a large extended family or small family, young brides married to migrant men are expected to perform similar duties: taking care of parents-in-law and other household obligations.

Sauda (15) did not reveal a strong desire to continue her religious education. Rather she regarded her education (religious) very lightly, as an insignificant part of life before marriage. Similarly, other teen brides including 14-year-old Monira and 18-year-old Habiba indicated a lack of desire to continue their *madrassa* education.

Teen brides who attended *madrassa* are least interested in continuing education

Monira (14), Sauda (15) and Habiba's (18) attendance in *madrassa* before their marriage sheds light on the fact that young women who attended *madrassa* were more reluctant to continue their study after marriage. This group of brides did not necessarily have any regrets for being made to leave their education compared to the young brides who attended secular school. For example, Mim (19) and Tahida (19) who attended secular school both expressed a strong determination to continue their education even after marriage but were not able to pursue that aspiration.

On this note, the difference between *madrassa* and secular school, and how this may relate to a young woman's marriage prospects, are worth mentioning here. Girls in the villages attend female-only *madrassa* where they learn Quran, and Arabic studies. The non-coeducational system means there is no interaction between girls and boys. These *madrassas* have a boarding system (Mamun and Shaon, 2018; Debnath and Selim, 2009) and therefore, girls do not have to commute every day. On the other hand, attending secular schools requires weekdays commuting. Despite wearing *burkha* or hijab, their daily commute to schools still exposes them to the gaze of local men on the street. Moreover, if the secular school is

not gender-segregated and runs according to a coeducational system, the girls' parents as well as the potential parents-in-law may regard it as undesirable. Thompson and Rob's (2021) [policy brief](#) from Bangladesh, and Anzar and Carter's (2006) USAID [report](#) from India on *madrassa* education confirm similar details. These studies show that many religious parents believe *madrassas* are safer for girls because of the gender segregation that follows conservative Islamic practices. Thompson and Rob (2021) cite Adams (2015), who found in Bangladesh girls at *madrassas* often receive lessons concerning proper Islamic etiquette and manners aimed at constructing an ideal woman and guardian of Islamic virtue and piety. A woman's 'purity' is a critical factor in marriageability, bringing up concerns about her dress, whereabouts and age at marriage (Adams, 2015, p. 7). Therefore, *madrassa* enrolled girls in the villages have a reputation as 'pure' and religiously minded, and thus more appropriate to meet marriage requirements.

As explained above, girls who attend *madrassa* are more likely to recognise traditional wifely duties in the future when they are married. Also, in a religious school context, they are taught about traditional gender roles such as serving their husbands and families-in-law and maintaining strict Islamic dress code. *Madrassas* in these villages are largely focused on Arabic teaching, unlike the secular schools where students learn English, math, science, Bengali and other subjects. Badrunnesha and Kwauk (2015) found that in Bangladesh, government and NGOs are more likely to collaborate with state (secular) schools to implement innovative life skills programming. *Madrassas* are less likely to obtain the kind of external attention or support that could lead to initiatives targeting the social and cultural obstacles impeding girls' educational outcomes (Badrunnesha and Kwauk, 2015). Secular school's education is more engaging, skilful and gratifying compared to *madrassa*'s, or Arabic education that often follows strict religious strictures. Mamun and Shaon (2018) also reported in [Dhaka Tribune](#) that mischievous sons can be sent to *madrassas* to help them

become ‘good human beings.’ These rigorous characteristics of *madrassa* can make it less appealing to its attendees.

Regression analysis of data on enrolment growth rates suggests that the presence of modernised *madrassa* is strongly associated with the boom in female schooling in Bangladesh (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2009). Yet most of the *madrassas* are not modernised, particularly in remote villages (Mamun and Shaon, 2018), and there is a lack of data on how and what those *madrassas* teach to its pupils. A quantitative approach looking at the enrolment growth of female students at these ‘modernised’ *madrassas* cannot prove whether the girls remained in these institutions and completed their study. Indeed, Badrunnesha and Kwauk (2015) report that the existing data indicates that majority will not complete secondary school or transition to university, even though *madrassas* provide over 1.5 million girls in Bangladesh the opportunity to be educated.

Masooda Bano (2015) researched *madrassa* reform and Islamic modernism in Bangladesh. In her study, Bano (2015, p. 911) argued that although the *aliya madrassa* system in Bangladesh has succeeded in integrating secular subjects in the *madrassa* curriculum, but in reality, this modernisation project has failed in its fundamental goal to generate a ‘modern discourse’ on Islam. Elsewhere, a recent study (Roy et al., 2020) on faith and education in Bangladesh suggests female graduates from *madrassas* often go on to formal employment, although there is no data on numbers or career choices. However, the study (Roy et al., 2020, p. 8) also highlighted that *madrassas* continue to spread public messages about restrictions regarding Muslim women’s work and their bodies that appear restraining to women who do not subscribe to *madrassa* ideology. Similarly, more studies from Bangladesh show females who completed their *madrassa* degrees and integrated into male-dominated Islamic forums and organisations are not motivated by a desire to challenge male dominance in these institutions or in Islam more broadly (Adams, 2015;

Begum and Kabir, 2012). My findings from the remote villages of Bogura district illustrate that *madrassa* attendees are more likely to leave their education early compared to their secular school's counterparts. It is also evident that the youngest brides (14, 15, 16 and 18-year-old) were the ones who were enrolled in *madrassa*.

The increased propensity towards sending children, particularly female children to *madrassa* also has a relation to men's migration. Studies (Rao and Hossain, 2012; Debnath and Selim, 2009) have already claimed that returned migrants from the Middle East tend to endorse *madrassa* education in rural Bangladesh. Education and independent physical mobility for women have not been facilitated yet in the remote villages of Bangladesh; and men's migration appears to have not played a part in generating such constructive social changes. Previous quantitative research (Hadi, 2001) from Bangladesh that noted a correlation between men's migration and increases in female children's educational enrolment failed to detail that migrant men are often married to teenage women whose education terminates once married.

Conclusion:

In this paper I explored the episodes of marriage and schooling of rural Bangladeshi teen brides who are married to labour migrant men. In the villages studied, parents favoured marriages of their teen daughters with migrants on the assumption that physical absence of the husbands would curtail traditional duties for the wives. The belief was that marriage with a migrant man would ultimately facilitate the continuation of education for a teen bride. However, the teen brides could not disregard their traditional duties towards families-in-law despite their marriages to migrant men and eventually, were withdrawn from their education. Brides who attended *madrassa* were more prone to leave education earlier, compared to their counterparts who attended secular school.

Neither religious education nor early marriage empowers these young women, nor do they provide these women with any bargaining power in a patriarchal context. Ethel Crowley (2014, p. 476) mentions that ‘we must turn to the study of culture to show that women who are ostensibly passive often resist patriarchy in many inventive yet practical ways, as it exists in their own local environment’. In light of this view, early marriage may appear as accommodating for women, since it serves safety in broader society and ways to fulfil romantic desires. But emphasis on understanding the local culture undermines the struggle of these local women that certain strands of Western feminism may be reluctant to acknowledge owing to the risk of being categorised as imperialist. I tried to highlight that in northern rural Bangladesh, *madrassa* education and early marriage are hindrances to young women’s general wellbeing, freedom and economic opportunities. Religious schooling serves as a model for creating modest housewives.

However, recent scholarship suggests that secular schools can also repeat exclusionary gender norms and prepare girls for traditional social roles (Chisamy, DeJaeghere, Kendall, & Khan, 2013; DeJaeghere & Lee, 2011; Fernandes, 2014; Murphy-Graham, 2008), partly because school textbooks around the developing world characterise women in traditional occupational roles and promote stereotypes concerning the division of labour within marriage (Blumberg, 2015; Islam & Asadullah, 2018). Yet findings from my research suggest young brides who went to secular school were more eager to continue education compared to their *madrassa* counterparts, who were reluctant to continue their Islamic studies. I have argued that extolling religious schooling and traditional practices such as early marriage in the name of understanding or respecting local culture is hazardous and detrimental to women’s educational and economic opportunities.

Notes

*All names of the study participants are anonymised to maintain confidentiality.

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