Female Age at Marriage of Rural-Urban Differentials in Bangladesh
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Abstract
The aim was to study the influences of several background factors on age at marriage of ever-married females living in urban and rural areas of Bangladesh. Data was collected by Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) in 2004. Chi-square test was performed to find the association between age at marriage and background factors of Bangladeshi females. Logistic regression analysis was used to identify the factors which were responsible for the age at marriage among ever-married females. Chi-square test demonstrated that age at marriage was positively associated (p<.01) with the level of female and her husband education for urban and rural. Muslim female showed lower probability in getting married at legal age (age of 18+ years) than that of non-Muslim and the probability was higher for rural areas. The results exhibited that only 7.4% of rural and about 14% of urban females got married at the age of 18+ years. Moreover, logistic regression analysis showed that husbands and their wife’s education, geographic regions, religion and watching TV were significantly effect on the age at marriage of Bangladeshi females. The results of this study provide some additional suggestive policy measures that the planners and implementers may consider for quality development of the inconsistent factors.

INTRODUCTION
Bangladesh gained independence on March 26, 1971 after a bloody war of liberation. It possessed the seventh position in the world due to its larger size of population (PRB, 2007). Low age at marriage is a common feature in country and considered as one of the main causes of larger size of population. Actually, there is a strong association between population growth, fertility, mortality, mother and child health, use of contraception and low age at marriage. Obviously, it affects population growth rate by changing the number of births and the mean length of generation.

Marriage entails a change from any other marital status to the status of married. In accordance with the recommendation made in Principles for a Vital Statistics System (1953), “the legal union of persons of opposite sex. The legality of the union may be established by civil, religious or other means as recognized by the laws of each country.” Asia was historically identified with very early marriage having been part of what Hajnal (1965) described as an ‘eastern marriage pattern’ with early and universal marriage, in contrast to the pattern of Western Europe characterized by a late marriage with a significant proportion of the population never marrying. In much of Asia, in particular, in East and Southeast Asia, age at marriage for women has risen by several years, and more recently evidence has appeared indicating that a substantial section of the population who will never marry (Jones 2004, Smith 1980, Xenos and Gultiano 1992). Marriage patterns in South Asia have also changed, but with the exception of Sri Lanka much less radically than in East and Southeast Asia. Age at marriage for females, but much less for males, has risen from a much lower base. Historically, women in South Asia, with the exception of Sri Lanka, married around or before menarche. The singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) in British India (including modern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) was still below 15 years in the 1931 census before slowly edging up thereafter. This process only started in Bangladesh after the 1961 census. In contrast to female age at marriage, the male marriage age has risen only a little and inconsistently. This indicates that very different factors have been driving it. While the female marriage age has been rising slowly in South Asia, in contrast to East and Southeast Asia, there is little firm evidence outside Sri Lanka that a sizable proportion of the population will not marry. This is in part because age at marriage remains much earlier than in East and Southeast Asia and there is more time to marry. It is also because arranged marriage remains dominant and is used to ensure marriage. Marriage is almost universal in Bangladesh. The universality of marriage and
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low age at marriage is related to the religious affiliation and lower status of females in the society. In 1984, through a government order, the legislative age at marriage in Bangladesh was fixed at 18 years for female and 21 years for males. However, in the countryside, such requirements are hardly known and among those who do not about them, they have little impact on behavior (Islam et al., 1995). A large proportion of marriages still take place before the legal age (BDHS, 2004). Islam and Mahmud (1996) in a logistic analysis of the 1989 BFS found that the most important factor for early female marriages were in order to female education, husband’s occupation, region of residence (urban or rural), women’s working status, and husband’s education. Similarly, Shaikh (1997) found in an analysis of data from the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR, B) field station at Matlab that wife’s education and husband’s occupation had the largest effects. Rahman (2005) in his study showed that age at marriage increased with the level of husband and wife’s education. The study showed that female education has the strongest influence on age at marriage while husband’s education is the second strongest determinant. It also indicates that respondent’s occupation and their religion have an important significant contribution to female age at marriage.

Age at marriage is a most important factor in population dynamics as it affects fertility tremendously and mortality and migration to a lesser extent. In Bangladesh, where marriage is nearly universal, age at marriage has a strong influence on a variety of demographic, social and economic factors. This study will be able to pay a greater attention to find out those factors that are influencing the female age at marriage in Bangladesh both in rural and urban areas, so as to manipulate to rise age at marriage and thereby to control fertility and population growth by the year 2015.

The purpose of the present study was to identify the most influential factors that are contributing in female age at marriage both in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

MATERIALS

The present study was conducted among the ever-married women in their reproductive age group (15-49) years in Bangladesh. The required data and necessary information were taken from Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS), 2004. It was the fourth survey in a series of national-level population and health survey utilized a multistage cluster sample, based on the Bangladesh Census, 2001.

METHODS

Chi-square test was used to find the association between ages at marriage with background factors of Bangladeshi females. Logistic regression analysis was applied to identify the risk factors and to predict the probability of success. The general logistic model expresses a qualitative dependent variable as a function of several independent variables, both qualitative and quantitative (Fox, 1984). If P is the probability of getting married at the age of 18+ years, then

Figure 1

\[ \ln \left( \frac{P_i}{1-P_i} \right) = \beta X = \sum_{j=0}^{k} \beta_j X_{ji} \]

where, \( \beta \) is a vector of the unknown coefficient and X is a vector of covariates that affect the legal age at marriage. The general logistic regression model can thus be expressed as:

Figure 2

\[ P = \left[ 1 + \exp(-\beta X) \right]^{-1} \]

which express the log odds of current users as a linear function of the dependent variable.

In Bangladesh, the legal minimum age at marriage for women is 18 years. In logistic model, the dichotomous response variable was assigned the value 1 for getting married at the age of 18+ years and 0 otherwise. The explanatory variables were: geographic region, respondents and their husbands’ education, working status, religion, watching TV and husband’s occupation. Statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS software.

MARRIAGES IN BANGLADESH

Marriage in Bangladesh, as in neighboring North India, was traditionally very early (Maloney et al., 1981; Lindenbaum 1981). Among Hindus, in particular, child marriage – marriage before menarche - was common. It was also widely believed that early marriage for girls made them more malleable and accepting of their new family circumstances, and in particular of the authority of their husbands, and in-laws. Early marriage is perceived particularly by Hindus to be in keeping with the notion of the Joint Family, where ideally property is held jointly with the husband’s brothers.
Female age at marriage has been rising intermittently since the 1960s. The simulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) was 13.9 years at the 1961 census – an apparent decline from 14.4 in 1951, but it rose to 15.9 by the 1974 census, 16.4 by the 1981 census and 18.1 by the 1991 census (Xenos and Gultiano 1992; United Nations 2000). The Bangladesh Fertility Survey of 1975-76 (Maloney et al., 1981) found that mean age at marriage of women who first married in 1927 was 10.9 years, while for women who married in 1957 it was 13.0 and for the youngest marriage cohort it was about 15.

The 1999/2000 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) found a median marriage age among all women 15-49 (including both married and unmarried women) of 14.7 years. Older women aged 45-49 years recorded 13.8 years, and those aged 20-24, 16.1 years (Mitra et al., 2001). Age at marriage was varied by region, education and urban/rural residence. It was earliest in the two divisions believed to be most influenced by Hindu ideals, Rajshahi and Khulna, even though these areas are said to be those where Purdah is weakest. This was also despite the fact that Hindus now, in general, marry later than Muslims, in part because of higher education rates. For the ages 20-49 years, women with no education married at 14.0 years, primary incomplete 14.4, primary complete 15.0, and secondary plus 17.2 years. Secondary school often means delaying marriage. Women aged 45-49 years with secondary plus schooling married 2.1 years later than women with no education (15.6 years versus 13.5); for women aged 20-24 years the difference was 4.5 years (19.0 versus 14.5 years). Urban women aged 20-49 married at 16.2 years as compared to 13.7 years among rural women, a difference of 2.5 years. The difference increased from 0.9 years (14.6 years versus 13.7) for women aged 45-49 to 2.6 years (18.3 years versus 15.7) for women 20-24 years. This implies the rural-urban difference was larger than suggested by an uncontrolled comparison, but also that the change over time within the urban population was exaggerated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
BIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Table 1 reveals the background information of the respondents living both in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. Among the six administrative regions, the maximum number of rural women (24.0%) were from Rajshahi region, followed by Dhaka (19.4%), Chittagong (17.3%), Khulna (14.9%), Barisal (13.4%) and Sylhet (11.0%), respectively. In case of urban areas, the maximum number of women were from Dhaka region (28.8%), followed by Chittagong (19.7%), Rajshahi (19.3%), Khulna (15.0%), Barisal (9.0%) and Sylhet (8.1%), respectively. The illiteracy rate was higher among rural women (42.4%) than that of urban (31.4%). Women empowerment should be enhanced through the participation of women in income related activates as the results indicated that about 80% of the rural and 75% of urban women did not have any job (are not working). The results also showed that the majority of the respondents (about 80% of rural and 90% of urban) were Muslims by religion. Occupations of the husband were categorized into two groups such as manual (includes those who were involved directly with physical labor to earn) and non-manual (includes those who were involved with different professional, clerical and business related activities to earn). The results indicated that more than 75% of the rural husbands were engaged with manual occupation and about 62% for urban.
To see the association between age at marriage and various selected background characteristics of rural-urban differentials in Bangladesh, a well-known statistical tool namely- Pearson Chi-square test procedure was used and the results are presented in Table 2. The results revealed that there were significant variations in legal age at marriage (among rural and urban women, it was 7.4% and 13.9%, respectively) among women with different socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Among the selected background characteristics – geographic region, respondents and their husbands’ education, religion, watching TV and husband’s occupation were significantly associated with the age at marriage of the ever-married women of Bangladesh.

### Figure 3

Table 1: Distribution of the respondents by background characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background characteristics</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No education</td>
<td>4112</td>
<td>1080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>3424</td>
<td>811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>2878</td>
<td>528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher secondary and above</td>
<td>828</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working</td>
<td>5994</td>
<td>1422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working for earning</td>
<td>1542</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>6701</td>
<td>1611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Muslim</td>
<td>6866</td>
<td>1734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No education</td>
<td>3013</td>
<td>676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>2647</td>
<td>592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>1785</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher secondary and above</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>4112</td>
<td>1080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3424</td>
<td>811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital</td>
<td>5544</td>
<td>1487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-marital</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7536</td>
<td>1921</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

The results of logistic regression analysis are presented in Table 3 in the form of logistic regression coefficients, p-value, and relative odds ratio corresponding to the selected explanatory variables both for rural and urban areas.

Dhaka division was considered as the combination and interactions of all other divisions, therefore, considering Dhaka as reference category, the regression coefficients both for rural and urban ever-married women of Bangladesh under different geographic regions were being calculated. Except for the rural areas of Barisal division, all results showed the statistically significant effect on age at marriage. For rural areas, the odds ratio corresponding to Chittagong and Sylhet divisions were found 1.737 and 3.131, respectively. This clearly indicated that the women of Chittagong and Sylhet divisions had 1.737 and 3.131 times respectively more probability in getting their married after the legal age at marriage (18+ years) than the women of Dhaka division (reference category). On the other hand, for urban areas, the odds ratio corresponding to Chittagong and Sylhet divisions were found 1.504 and 1.986 respectively. This also indicated that the women of Chittagong and Sylhet
divisions had 1.504 and 1.986 times respectively more probability in getting their married after the legal age at marriage (18+ years) than that of the women of Dhaka division (Table 3).

It is apparent from the results that there are significant regional variations in age at marriage among the women of Bangladesh. Therefore, to order to achieve the replacement level fertility within 2015, various programs should be taken to remove the regional variations in age at marriage among the women of Bangladesh.

Education is the key determinant of the life style and status enjoys in a society. For this reason, the regression coefficients corresponding to different levels of education both for respondents and their husbands were calculated. It was seen that the results had statistically significant effect (both for rural and urban areas) on age at marriage except corresponding to primary level of education.

From the results, it is also evident that the women and their husbands of urban areas with secondary and higher secondary+ level education have higher age at marriage (married after the age of 18 years) than their rural counterparts.

In order to identify the impact of working status on age at marriage of the women, the respondents were categorized into working and not working. The regression coefficients demonstrated that working status of urban areas had significant effect on age at marriage. The odds ratio corresponding to working women of urban areas was 1.265. It means that the women of urban areas of Bangladesh have 1.265 times higher probability in getting married after the age of 18 years than the non working women of urban areas (reference category). In the contrary, the working women of rural areas had an effect on age at marriage, with working women having 1.161 times more likely to go for married after the age of 18 years, but it was not statistically significant (Table 3).

Religion is another important and highly significant factor influencing age at marriage of the respondents. The logistic co-efficient indicated that the highest occurrence of married after the age of 18 was among non-Muslim women of urban areas, followed by non-Muslims women of rural areas. It appears that the rural and urban non-Muslim women are 1.981 and 2.122 times respectively more likely to go for getting married after the age of 18 than the Muslim women (Table 3).

Mass media can play a strong role by creating awareness about the early marriage related complications and the bad effect of these complications in the future health of mothers and their new born babies. The result showed that the rural and urban women who watched TV were 1.101 and 1.579 times respectively more likely to go for getting married after the age of 18 than that of the women who did not watch. The result also showed the highly significant (statistically) effect for urban areas but for rural areas, this effect was not statistically significant.

Occupation of the husband had an effect on the female age at marriage, with husbands having non-manual occupation being 0.966 times less likely for rural and 1.13 times more likely for urban for getting married after the age of 18, but these effect were not statistically significant.

Table 3: Logistic regression estimates of the effects of different background characteristics on age at marriage of rural–urban differentials in Bangladesh

**CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION**

In this study a limited attempt has been made to investigate...
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some important aspects of female age at marriage among ever-married women living both in urban and rural areas of Bangladesh. The results of the study indicate that substantial differentials are to be observed both in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. Although the mean age at marriage of female increases over the past few years, it is also well below the minimum legal age at marriage (18 year), established by the government of Bangladesh in 1976. More than 85% of women living in urban areas get married before the legal age whereas for rural women this figure is very high (more than 90%). Education is one of the most viable means for enhancing the status of women as well as rising the age at marriage. The study clearly indicates that the higher the level of education both for the women and their husband, the higher the age at marriage in Bangladesh. Muslims women show lower probability in getting married at legal age (age of 18+ years) than the Non-Muslims and this probability is higher for rural areas. Women who are not engaged in works, their probability in getting married before the age of 18 is higher than the women who are engaged in works. The role of TV as mass media also helps women to increase the minimum age at marriage. In conclusion, analyzing the total effects and differentials of the selected variables in this study, it appears that both husband and their wife’s education, geographic regions, religion and watching TV are significantly associated with the age at marriage of females in Bangladesh. Finally, the study findings lead to the following policy implications:

To enhance the level of education both the husbands and their wives.

Existing laws and regulations relating to legal age at marriage should be reinforced uniformly through all over the country especially in rural areas.

An important challenge is to reduce the regional (geographic) as well as rural-urban differentials to increase the age at marriage of females in Bangladesh. In order to over come such differentials, awareness must be created through the public and private mass media as well as through the community leaders so that marriages do not occur before the fixed minimum age.

References

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