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# CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE: A Political Economy Analysis of Bangladesh

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Iris Group

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## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2020, Iris Group conducted a political economy analysis (PEA) of the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in Bangladesh to contextualize the work of the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium<sup>1</sup> and to offer a high-level view of the environment for CEFM programming in the country. Through a desk review and key informant interviews, this analysis found the following:

ANALYSIS PILLAR	KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<b>Foundational Factors</b>  <i>(e.g., embedded structures, such as geography, class, ethnicity)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is high geographical variation of child marriage rate, from 31% to 66.7%; urban and rural differences are also significant</li> <li>• Flooding and other natural disasters are more prevalent due to climate change; related insecurity contributes to child marriage</li> <li>• Poverty and the custom of dowry contribute to child marriage, but even in the richest quintile, more than one in three girls marry before 18</li> <li>• Gender inequality is the primary factor in shaping beliefs about girls as economic and social liabilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing poverty may alleviate child marriage, but addressing gender inequality is essential to ensuring long-term change</li> <li>• District-level programs need to account for factors other than wealth differences; crime and perceptions of girls' safety are also critical</li> <li>• While religious differences do not appear to drive child marriage prevalence differences, engaging religious leaders to oppose CEFM could help shift customs and norms</li> </ul>
<b>Rules of the Game</b>  <i>(e.g., laws, international commitments, policies, social norms)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) affirmed legal age of marriage as 18 for girls and 21 for boys; proposal to lower legal age (to 16/18) was abandoned due to international and national pressure</li> <li>• CMRA strengthened punishments for child marriage, but created loopholes; parents and authorities commonly evade enforcement</li> <li>• Relevant social norms are dowry; control of female sexuality; restrictions on female mobility; parental obedience; male dominance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bangladesh's government has made public commitments to ending child marriage while creating a legal environment that allows it to continue</li> <li>• Mechanisms to enforce the law, such as birth certificates and marriage registration, must be strengthened to deter child marriages</li> <li>• Social norms carry more weight than legal prohibitions; programs that effectively address social norms with a gender lens should be a priority over new legal approaches</li> </ul>
<b>Here and Now</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government institutions working on child marriage have a costed plan, but do not</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs needs institutional strengthening, and</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> The Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium was convened to facilitate coordinated action and learning among seven research, advocacy, and implementation-oriented partners. The Consortium includes: The GIRL Center at the Population Council, UNICEF, Girls Not Brides, Iris Group, Fraym, the University of California San Diego's Center on Gender Equity and Health, and Unchained At Last.

ANALYSIS PILLAR	KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<i>(e.g., current events and circumstances)</i>	<p>appear to have the political will to pursue a robust, coherent strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robust civil society, including international organizations, working on CEFM; hindered by lack of coordination</li> <li>• Most approaches have not overcome social norms and economic incentives of CEFM</li> <li>• COVID-19's economic impact on Bangladesh is likely severe, with CEFM increasing as a result</li> </ul>	<p>CEFM needs meaningful support from top country leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements in coordination and increased participation of civil society in policy, programming should be a priority</li> <li>• Programs must balance politically appealing approaches with efforts to challenge traditional norms</li> </ul>
<p><b>Dynamics</b></p> <p><i>(e.g., interplay among the other pillars)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Progress:</b> Capable civil society and research community; grassroots youth groups; sub-national data on child marriage; evidence on program success; norms-shifting programs are succeeding in reducing CEFM, improving girls' mobility</li> <li>• <b>Obstacles:</b> Growing authoritarianism; lack of coordinated advocacy strategy; weak Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs (MOWCA); low evidence on what works where and why; limited data on social norms; lack of strategic programming coordination; programs don't address root causes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy efforts and investments should strengthen international non-governmental organization (INGO) and civil society coordination and voice, centered on National Action Plan accountability at national and local level</li> <li>• Strong research capacity and existing subnational data should be used to unlock keys to success in each region, with an emphasis on social norms change</li> <li>• Programming needs to address root causes, including social and gender norms that perpetuate CEFM; Improved coordination would help civil society organizations (CSOs), INGOs and government stakeholders better understand the issue, key approaches, and how to complement each other</li> </ul>

The findings of this PEA support the following conclusions and recommendations:

### Case for Investment

- **Bangladesh would benefit from a combination of actors pushing for increased political will.** Bangladesh has shown that it responds to international encouragement, and a positioning of anti-CEFM efforts as a critical recovery strategy could move the issue higher up on the agenda.
- **Bangladesh could provide rich and important lessons on CEFM.** The importance of gender-based violence and social norms as driving forces of CEFM creates an urgency for new approaches and provides a rich learning environment.

### Key Points of Leverage in Bangladesh on CEFM

- **The costed National Action Plan and its monitoring and evaluation framework can be leveraged for improved multi-sectoral coordination.** The creation of the Plan was an

important benchmark, which now needs to be translated into a meaningful roadmap for accelerated action to address child marriage across government ministries.

- **Bangladesh-based development and research experience can be mobilized for increased progress.** Bangladesh-based organizations and research institutions have the capacity to fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge around child marriage, particularly on the factors affecting differential progress rates.
- **Subnational data provides improved clues on regional differences.** While not showing the full picture of why regional disparities in child marriage prevalence exist, improved subnational data collection is an important first step in understanding the disparate drivers and contextual circumstances that mitigates or sustains CEFM in divisions, districts, and villages.

### Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **Investing in rights-based civil society groups can help ensure girls' voices are central.** Women's groups and youth-led groups need to have a stronger voice in setting the direction of anti-CEFM efforts at a national and local level, and they have a history of activism around gender-based violence.
- **The Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs is critical to reducing CEFM and needs strengthening.** MOWCA currently needs greater capacity to convene other ministries and ensure implementation of the National Action Plan.
- **A cross-sectoral body that works at national and subnational levels can improve strategic coordination.** Government agencies, donors, implementing organizations, researchers, and advocates appear to be addressing CEFM in an uncoordinated way that can generate misunderstanding, resentment, confusion, and inefficiencies.

## II. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In 2020, Iris Group conducted a political economy analysis (PEA) of the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in Bangladesh to contextualize the work of the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium<sup>2</sup> and to offer a high-level view of the environment for CEFM programming in the country. The ultimate purpose of this analysis is to provide macro-level context for the findings from learning consortium investments.

Iris Group adapted an existing framework for applied political economy analysis from the 2018 USAID PEA Guide for Practitioners (Menocal et al., 2018) to identify the underlying context for CEFM. The team performed a desk review of grey and peer-reviewed literature and conducted eight semi-structured interviews with nine key informants on the topic. This PEA was gender-intentional, examining how Bangladeshi society understands and enforces male and female roles and responsibilities, and how its political dynamics have shaped the narrative around the equal rights of women and girls. This gender intentional focus was incorporated into our interview guide for key informants and our analysis of the findings.

Iris Group assessed the findings using four angles of analysis:

- **Foundational Factors:** Embedded structures that are difficult or impossible to change, such as geography, class, ethnicity, gender inequality
- **Rules of the Game:** Laws, international commitments, policies, and social norms
- **Here and Now:** Current events and circumstances
- **Dynamics:** Interplay among the other pillars

This report presents the CEFM context in Bangladesh, summarizes the findings within each pillar of analysis from the desk review and interviews, and provides recommendations based on these findings for potential responses to CEFM in Bangladesh.

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<sup>2</sup> The Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium was convened to facilitate coordinated action and learning among seven research, advocacy, and implementation-oriented partners. The Consortium includes: The GIRL Center at the Population Council, UNICEF, Girls Not Brides, Iris Group, Fraym, the University of California San Diego's Center on Gender Equity and Health, and Unchained At Last.

### III. CONTEXT

Over the past two decades, Bangladesh has boasted strong economic progress. Since 2000, per capita Gross National income has quadrupled, from \$440 to \$1940 in 2019. The population living below the national poverty line dropped to 21.8 percent in 2018, from 24.3 percent in 2016 (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Just under 10 percent of the population lived below \$1.90 daily purchasing power. Economic gains, however, have come at the same time as regressions in democratic governance. Over the past decade, the country has witnessed democratic backsliding (Riaz, 2020), with two rigged elections (and the jailing of journalists reporting on them), adoption of legal measures that restrict freedom of speech, and increasing symptoms of authoritarianism (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

While women have long occupied prominent political roles throughout the country, women's status in Bangladesh has been, since the country's founding, one of profound inequality. Since 1991, three women have held the office of Prime Minister, with the current PM, Sheikh Hasina, serving a 4<sup>th</sup> (non-consecutive) term. Women also hold other high-level positions, including Speaker of Parliament and Leader of the Opposition. However, women still only comprise 20 percent of Parliament, and the cabinet remains predominantly male. Gender inequality is similarly prominent in the general population: Bangladesh ranks 135<sup>th</sup> on both the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Inequality Index. Mean years of schooling for females is 5.3, compared to 6.8 for males. Gender gaps in earnings are stark: GNI \$5,700 compared to female GNI of \$2,373 (UNDP, 2019). Violence against women remains extremely prevalent: over two-thirds (72.6%) of married women experienced some form of violence by their husband in their lifetime, while more than one quarter (27.8%) of women reported lifetime physical violence by someone other than their husband (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Regarding child marriage prevalence, UNICEF's latest figures (from 2019) show that 15.5 percent of women age 20-24 years were married before age 15 and 51.4 percent were married before age 18 (UNICEF et al., 2019). Marriage before age 18 varied widely between regions; Sylhet had the lowest prevalence, at 31.0 percent, compared to a high of 66.7 percent in Rajshahi. Unlike in most other countries where rates are lower in urban areas, the urban division of Dhaka was close to the national average, at 48.6 percent, slightly higher than the average in all urban areas (44.0%) and slightly below rural areas (53.8%). Since the 2012-2013 MICS, the country has shown only minute progress in reducing child marriage rates. The 2013 MICS does not stratify for women aged 20-24, but does allow comparison between women age 20-49 at the time of the survey. In 2019, respective rates for marriage before age 15 and marriage before age 18 among this broader age group were 22.6 percent and 60.0 percent – modest reductions from 2013, when the same rates were 27.2 percent and 62.8 percent (UNICEF et al., 2015).

## IV. FINDINGS

### A. Foundational Factors

This section explores embedded or fixed structures that affect CEFM. Embedded structures are those that do not quickly change and should be considered as constants in any CEFM strategy. The table below summarizes the key findings that are explored in this section, and implications of these findings for CEFM strategy.

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There is high geographical variation of child marriage rate, from 31% to 66.7%; urban and rural differences are also significant</li><li>• Flooding and other natural disasters are more prevalent due to climate change; related insecurity contributes to child marriage</li><li>• Poverty and the custom of dowry contribute to child marriage, but even in the richest quintile, more than one in three girls marry before 18</li><li>• Gender inequality is the primary factor in shaping beliefs about girls as economic and social liabilities</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Addressing poverty may alleviate child marriage, but addressing gender inequality is essential to ensuring long-term change</li><li>• District-level programs need to account for factors other than wealth differences; crime and perceptions of girls' safety are also critical</li><li>• While religious differences do not appear to drive child marriage prevalence differences, engaging religious leaders to oppose CEFM could help shift customs and norms</li></ul>

Bangladesh child marriage prevalence rates for 20 to 24 year-old women vary greatly among its eight divisions, although no division's rate falls below 30 percent (UNICEF et al., 2019). Sylhet has the lowest rate at 31 percent, and it also has had the most progress of all divisions since 1994, falling from 64 percent (UNICEF, 2020). Girls in rural areas have a 10 percent higher chance of marrying early (Biswas et al., 2019). Informants and some of the literature attributed regional differences to insecurity and natural disasters, with climate change as an exacerbating factor (Interviews 9/15; Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). Extreme weather events such as catastrophic flooding send communities into shelters, where families fear the reputational risk of sexual violence against their girls, which they avoid if the girl is married (Ahmed et al., 2019). One study found that marrying off daughters in anticipation of



environmental crises was a common parental coping strategy to reduce household expenses (Ahmed et al., 2019).

### In Bangladesh, 51 per cent of young women were married in childhood

FIG. 1 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married before age 18

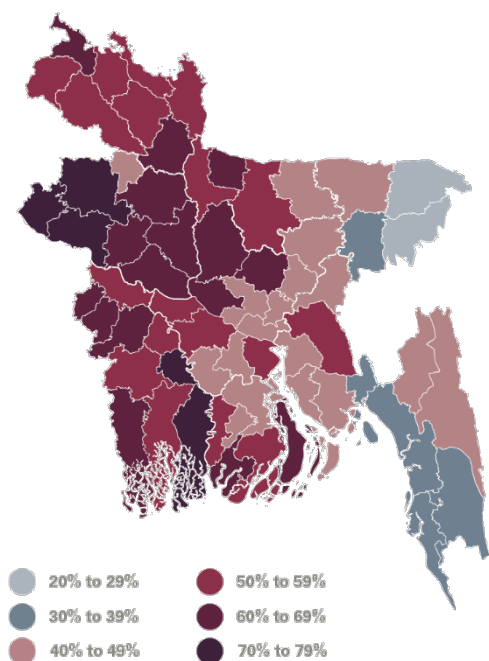


Figure 1: Child marriage prevalence by district (UNICEF, 2020)

Poverty increases vulnerability to extreme weather and is a contributing factor to child marriage throughout Bangladesh. Among the poorest two quintiles of Bangladeshi families, the child marriage rate is 63 and 61 percent (UNICEF, 2020). The middle and second highest quintiles are at 51 and 50 percent, while the rate falls to 38 percent among the richest families (UNICEF, 2020). Since 1970, child marriage has declined fairly evenly across economic quintiles, with a slightly higher drop among the richest (UNICEF, 2020). The literature indicates that the dowry system encourages child marriage among poorer families, as they do not have to pay as much to the groom's family if the girl is younger (CARE, 2016; Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018).

Two informants noted that, based on their observations, regional differences in child marriage rates did not follow expected patterns. One pointed out that in a more conservative religious area in eastern Bangladesh, child marriage is low; another

noted that Sylhet has low health and economic indicators yet has the lowest rate of all divisions (Interviews 9/16; 10/9).

Gender inequality is one of the primary drivers of child marriage in Bangladesh, as girls are considered liabilities for families from an economic and social standpoint (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). Two informants noted that due to gender inequality, girls' consent is not considered in child marriages and that "all early marriage is forced" in the Bangladesh context (Interviews, 9/16, 10/5). Married girls move to their husband's family, meaning that girls' parents see no return on investments in education or job training. Due to dowry, parents have a financial stake in the girl's reputational purity (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). As girls who are married young have little power in their marriages, poverty and gender inequality are replicated (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018; Kabir et al., 2019).

Bangladesh is majority Muslim, with a Hindu minority. A CARE community study found, "Religious and cultural beliefs differ between and among identity groups, but are similar in reinforcing early marriage" (CARE, 2016). One informant agreed, saying, "Bangladesh is mostly Muslim, but even among Hindus, the causes are mostly the same. Primarily the girls are seen as

a liability” (Interview, 9/16). While religious differences were not highlighted by informants, several surveys have found that the child marriage is more common among Muslims than non-Muslims, with non-Muslim women roughly half as likely to be married off before age 15 or age 18 (S. M. Kamal, 2012; S. M. M. Kamal & Hassan, 2015)

## B. Rules of the Game

This section explores Bangladesh’s formal and informal rules regulating individual, community, and government actions related to CEFM, which include national laws and policies, international commitments, and social norms. Key findings explored in this section and their implications for CEFM strategy are:

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) affirmed legal age of marriage as 18 for girls and 21 for boys; proposal to lower legal age (to 16/18) was abandoned due to international and national pressure</li> <li>• CMRA strengthened punishments for child marriage, but created loopholes; parents and authorities commonly evade enforcement</li> <li>• Relevant social norms are dowry; control of female sexuality; restrictions on female mobility; parental obedience; male dominance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bangladesh’s government has made public commitments to ending child marriage while creating a legal environment that allows it to continue</li> <li>• Mechanisms to enforce the law, such as birth certificates and marriage registration, must be strengthened to deter child marriages</li> <li>• Social norms carry more weight than legal prohibitions; programs that effectively address social norms with a gender lens should be a priority over new legal approaches</li> </ul>

The 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) is the primary legal framework in Bangladesh, setting the legal age of marriage at 18 for girls and 21 for boys/men (Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017). In 2014, the government promised several reforms related to child marriage, including strengthening the colonial era law from 1929, which established the same ages but was poorly enforced (Human Rights Watch, 2015). In 2015, however, the government proposed lowering the ages of marriage to 16 for girls and 18 for boys. In the face of international and civil society opposition, the government abandoned this proposal (Human Rights Watch, 2015). The 2017 law strengthens punishments by increasing the fine for those who marry or assist in the marriage of minors, but also legally recognizes poorly defined “special cases” that give parents and the courts a loophole (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). Government statements at the time indicated that they were seeking to make allowances for premarital pregnancy and elopements (CARE, 2016). Marriage in Bangladesh is also subject to religiously based “personal laws.” Muslim law, for example, has no minimum age of marriage, but requires marriage registration (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). Personal laws supersede CMRA; marriages that violate CMRA are only void if they also violate personal laws (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018).

Implementation of CMRA has been very limited. Girls who are to be married before 18 can in theory prevent marriage through injunction, but they would have to initiate court procedures themselves (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). When CMRA was introduced, civil society

groups cautioned that the loopholes in the law could result in parents forcing marriage on their daughters if they were impregnated as a result of rape. They asserted that the law's recognition of loopholes for parental consent, but not child consent, was a step backwards (Arora & Westcott, 2017). An informant called CMRA's special cases "a compromise on the part of the legal system of the country," which has actually built citizen resistance to child marriage laws by affirming exceptions (Interview, 10/9). According to an Oxfam study, the CMRA "has had minimal impacts on CEFM practices" (Ferdous et al., 2019). They found authorities in rural areas had little knowledge of the law, and that law enforcement had limited access to remote areas. In addition, local leaders may be complicit in child marriages, either because they have been bribed or they don't believe child marriage is wrong (Ferdous et al., 2019). While one informant said that the increased fine has helped improve the situation, the same person pointed out families' various means of evading the law (Interview 10/5). Another informant was dismissive of legal approaches on this issue, saying, "Punishing and punitive approaches are not helpful for communities that are poor" (Interview, 9/30).

Bangladesh has committed to ending under-18 child marriage by 2041, while seeking to end under-15 child marriage by 2021. While it has affirmed most human rights instruments related to child marriage, it has also included reservations based on Sharia and personal laws (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed "concerns" about the exceptions in the CMRA law. In 2018, the government released a costed National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage, with the backing of the Global Programme, but it does not yet have a monitoring and evaluation framework (Interview, 10/9).

Social and gender norms strongly affect child marriage in Bangladesh. The key norms, beliefs, and practices described in the literature and by informants include:

- **Dowry:** The dowry system (bride's family pays the groom's) began among wealthier families in the 1960s and spread to economically disadvantaged classes in the 80s, replacing bride price (groom's family pays the bride's) as male unemployment made wage-earning men attractive grooms (Stravropolou et al., 2017). Dowry is illegal, but often referred to as a gift to avoid questions (Interview, 9/15). Dowry increases as girls age, and lack of payment "is a major risk factor" for domestic violence (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2018).
- **Family Honor/Control of Girls' Sexuality:** It is seen as parents' responsibility to protect daughters' chastity, and delaying marriage can "invite gossip" and loss of a girls' reputation (Ahmed et al., 2019). Girls receive little to no information about sexuality before marriage (Interview 9/16).
- **Mobility:** To protect family honor, girls' mobility outside the home is often very restricted, and enforced through community vigilance, scolding, and beating. In some communities, bike riding for girls is becoming more acceptable for getting to and from school (Kausar et al., 2019)
- **Violence against Girls:** Due to their low status, adolescent girls commonly face sexual harassment, violence, and acid attacks, sometimes related to dowry. Violence promotes child marriage, as it reinforces girls' powerlessness and families can better avoid dowry-

related violence by marrying off their girls at a cheaper price (Mitu et al., 2019; Stravropolou et al., 2017)

- **Parental Obedience and Community Conformity:** Talking about your own marriage is stigmatized, making it difficult for girls to negotiate their marriage timing (Kausar et al., 2019). Upon marriage, for both Muslim and Hindu communities, girls move in with in-laws and are expected to obey them. This can contribute to isolation and violence (Stravropolou et al., 2017). Families are expected to conform to the tradition that girls marry below 18 (Ferdous et al., 2019).

CARE noted that “social norms and peer pressure make it harder for families to translate any resistance to child marriage into actions” (CARE, 2016). The benefits of child marriage – social/religious acceptance and economic advantage – outweigh the potential risks, as families see delayed marriage as bringing an impending risk of social criticism, elopement, loss of honor, higher dowry, risk of not finding a groom, and continued expense of supporting the daughter (CARE, 2016).

Any child marriage related program needs to address GBV. If the threat of sexual violence can be reduced...then the parents will feel safer for delayed marriage.

– Interview, 10/9

There have been positive changes, as half of women aged 15-49 who were married before 18 now believe it was too early (Ahmed et al 2019). An informant noted that norms are shifting with changing times, such as greater acceptance of girls and women working, and young girls becoming more aware of their rights (Interview, 9/30).

### C. Here and Now

This section examines the current state of affairs surrounding CEFM in Bangladesh, describing stakeholders, assessing strategic links to related issues, and gauging the impact of COVID-19. The most relevant factors in the *here and now*, and their implications for CEFM strategy, are:

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government institutions working on child marriage have a costed plan, but do not appear to have the political will to pursue a robust, coherent strategy</li> <li>• Robust civil society, including international organizations, working on child marriage; hindered by lack of coordination</li> <li>• Most approaches have not overcome social norms and economic incentives of CEFM</li> <li>• COVID-19’s economic impact on Bangladesh is likely severe, with CEFM increasing as a result</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs needs institutional strengthening, and CEFM needs meaningful support from top country leadership</li> <li>• Improvements in coordination and increased participation of civil society in policy, programming should be a priority</li> <li>• Programs must balance politically appealing approaches with efforts to challenge traditional norms</li> </ul>

## CEFM Stakeholders

STAKEHOLDERS	ROLE/POSITION ON CEFM
Federal Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina committed to ending child marriage by 2041, but her government has not sought civil society input and is unhelpful in affirming loopholes in child marriage laws (Interviews, 10/5, 10/9); country's move toward middle income status is seen as making them less responsive to international pressure (Sultan &amp; Nazneen, 2018)</li> <li>• Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs (MOWCA) is in charge of the National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage; works closely with UNICEF and UNFPA on child marriage; Education Ministry also collaborates on child marriage projects (Interviews, 9/16, 10/9)</li> <li>• Ministry of Home Affairs set up women's helpdesk in a police station in Jamalpur in 2015 with support from UNFPA to respond to gender-based violence (GBV) (UNFPA &amp; UNICEF, 2018)</li> <li>• The government does not have a standing coordinating body on CEFM that includes civil society</li> </ul>
District/Local Governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bangladesh's village or union level councils must include at least 3 women; some of these councils are forming standing committees on GBV and CEFM (Interview, 9/15)</li> <li>• Local governments are commonly engaged in child marriage projects, but do not have an integrated approach across sectors (Interview 10/9)</li> </ul>
Private, Bilateral and Multilateral Donors (Partial list)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNICEF/UNFPA through Global Programme support a number of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), including Plan, Population Council; helped the government with National Action Plan, now helping to get monitoring &amp; evaluation plan finished and released (Interview, 10/9)</li> <li>• Dutch government funded Population Council's BALIKA project (Amin et al., 2016)</li> <li>• USAID has a project in one district (Interview, 9/16); DFID supports Global Programme</li> <li>• Global Affairs Canada funds Oxfam's work on the issue (Ferdous et al., 2019)</li> <li>• Danish Government supports MOWCA's hotlines set up to report child marriage (Interview, 10/9)</li> <li>• Kendeda Fund supports CARE's Tipping Point project (Interview, 9/18)</li> <li>• Donors and UN agencies were included in consultative group on the National Action Plan, but not civil society organizations (CSOs) or INGOs (Interview, 10/9)</li> </ul>
International Non-Governmental Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BRAC, BRAC University, CARE, Oxfam, Bangladesh Population and Health Consortium, Population Council, Save the Children, Plan International, World Vision, ICRW-Asia, IDRC, and icddr,b work on child marriage, with others such as Ipas working on adolescent sexual and reproductive health.</li> <li>• INGOs have advocated for greater government commitment on child marriage and adolescent health but on controversial issues, government takes measures to silence them (Interview, 10/9)</li> </ul>
Civil Society Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are "vibrant" CSOs working on CEFM, some in combination with other issues, such as violence; most work on service delivery (Interviews 9/16, 10/5, 10/9)</li> </ul>

STAKEHOLDERS	ROLE/POSITION ON CEFM
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth-based organizations targeting child marriage are challenged by traditions around parental control (Interview, 9/15)</li> <li>Women's groups are very active since independence; lack influence in rural areas; don't always consider CEFM as violence against women; CARE is connecting youth groups to women's groups through Tipping Point (Interviews 9/15, 10/5)</li> </ul>
Religious Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There has not been political activism on child marriage from a religious angle, but one nonpolitical pro-Islamic group recently blamed abortion on late marriage (Interview 10/9)</li> <li>Religious leaders do not appear to typically be involved in CEFM programs</li> </ul>
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informants did not see the media as helpful or harmful in general on child marriage</li> </ul>
Individual Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several informants discussed the need to increase the involvement of men and boys</li> </ul>

### Strategic Links with Other Issues

Programs specifically designed to address CEFM in Bangladesh appear to be primarily small scale. In 1982, the government launched a nationwide conditional cash transfer program to keep girls in school and delay marriage. While it has been successful in eliminating the gender gap in education, it has not had a proven impact in reducing child marriage (Psaki, 2016). The Char Development and Settlement Project, which reached some 28,000 households in coastal parts of south-eastern Bangladesh, integrates attention to child marriage within a focus on poverty and hunger alleviation, and a recent request for further funding said it had reduced child marriage by 85% (Shahiduzzaman, 2017).

	Opportunities	Challenges
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Completion of secondary education is associated with lower rates of child marriage (National Institute of Population Research and Training - NIPORT/Bangladesh et al., 2016)</li> <li>Education can interrupt generational cycles of child marriage (Kabir et al., 2019)</li> <li>Girls have high educational aspirations; they connect it to delayed marriage (Kausar et al., 2019)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Primary education alone does not protect against child marriage (Biswas et al., 2019)</li> <li>Stipends may only keep girls in school temporarily; help families able to financially afford higher dowries (Psaki, 2016)</li> <li>School quality is poor; increases in education have not increased attainment (Amin et al., 2016)</li> </ul>
Economic Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Char project's integration of child marriage and gender into anti-poverty projects had impact</li> <li>Economic development approaches appeal to local officials (Sultan &amp; Nazneen, 2018)</li> <li>May shift norms around women's work, value (Interview, 9/18)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic approaches without gender/rights lens might replace forced marriage with forced work (Interview 9/30)</li> <li>Economic downturns are an ongoing risk; benefits likely to be temporary unless norms change (Interview, 10/5)</li> <li>BALIKA project's livelihoods intervention was less effective in reducing child</li> </ul>

	Opportunities	Challenges
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women’s labor force participation is relatively high in Bangladesh; evidence suggests girls may be married despite being employed (ICRW &amp; World Bank, 2017; Plan Asia Regional Office &amp; ICRW, 2013)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>marriage than other arms (Amin et al., 2016)</li> <li>High current female labor force participation, including by married girls, could suggest that increased economic opportunities may not reduce child marriage (Plan Asia Regional Office &amp; ICRW, 2013)</li> </ul>
Gender Norms, Empowerment and Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Programs that address under-15 marriage can reduce violence risk for all girls (Yount et al., 2016)</li> <li>CARE’s Tipping Point project improved girls’ mobility; increased aspirations (Interview, 10/5)</li> <li>Parents’ fear of sexual violence is a driver of CEFM (Interview, 10/9)</li> <li>Plan’s child rights focused work has raised community and children’s awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage (Plan Asia Regional Office &amp; ICRW, 2013)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political interest in rights-based approaches is limited (Sultan &amp; Nazneen, 2018)</li> <li>Control over girls’ sexuality is a very strong norm; hard to shift (Interview, 10/5)</li> <li>Risk of backlash against girls who go against social norms (UNFPA &amp; UNICEF, 2018)</li> </ul>
Sexual and reproductive health (SRH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Framing anti-CEFM work as a way to address maternal, neonatal, and child health has been popular among political leaders (interview, 10/9)</li> <li>Girls receive very little information about childbearing, sexual health before marriage (Interviews, 9/16, 10/9)</li> <li>Global Programme integrated life skills, menstrual management, GBV, sex education into government curricula (UNFPA &amp; UNICEF, 2018)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Programs framing CEFM around maternal mortality have not overcome parents’ perceived benefits of CEFM (Interview, 10/9)</li> <li>Difficult for adolescents to get information about sex due to taboos (Interview, 9/16)</li> <li>Teachers often refuse to teach sex education, and parents don’t engage with children on the topic (Interview, 9/16)</li> </ul>

### Effects of COVID-19 and Recent Events on CEFM

There have been some efforts to document the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage in Bangladesh, but they have been difficult to conduct with reduced access to much of the population (Interview, 10/9). While one informant said that marriages – including child marriages – had decreased over the last six months, most informants agreed that child marriage was likely to increase substantially due to the economic crisis and policymakers’ de-prioritization of the issue (Interviews, 9/16, 10/5, 10/9). One informant flagged that organizations would need to look at how migration caused by both COVID-19 and climate issues is affecting CEFM (Interview, 10/9). Some programming paused early in the lockdown, but several initiatives, like Population Council’s rural girls’ schooling program, were able to adjust with mobile technology (Amin et al., 2020).

Several organizations are monitoring the impact of the influx of refugees from Myanmar on child marriage. The Center for Reproductive Rights found, “Rohingya girls in refugee camps are being forced into child marriage, in part because it is a common cultural practice in the community, but largely in order to relieve the economic pressure on families in refugee camps” (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018). A GAGE study found that one of every five 15- to 19-year-old girls is already married due to family coping strategies. It found an average age of marriage of 15.5 years in both refugee camps and host communities, suggesting that surrounding child marriage rates are also affected by the crisis (Gugliemi et al., 2020).

**D. Dynamics**

This section analyzes the interactions among the previous three pillars of PEA analysis (Foundational Factors, Rules of the Game, and Here and Now). In the areas of **advocacy, research, and programming**, we assess where and how progress on CEFM in Bangladesh has evolved, and where the literature and informants identified threats and obstacles to progress.

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Progress:</b> Capable civil society and research community; grassroots youth groups; sub-national data on CEFM; evidence on program success; norms-shifting programs are succeeding in reducing CEFM, improving girls’ mobility</li> <li>• <b>Obstacles:</b> Growing authoritarianism; lack of coordinated advocacy strategy; weak MOWCA; low evidence on what works where and why; limited data on social norms; lack of strategic programming coordination; programs don’t address root causes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy efforts and investments should strengthen INGO and civil society coordination and voice, centered on National Action Plan accountability at national and local level</li> <li>• Strong research capacity and existing subnational data should be used to unlock keys to success in each region, with an emphasis on social norms change</li> <li>• Programming needs to address root causes, including social and gender norms that perpetuate CEFM; Improved coordination would help CSOs, INGOs and government stakeholders better understand the issue, key approaches, and how to complement each other</li> </ul>

**Areas of Progress**

Progress on child marriage in Bangladesh has moved slowly but tracks with the country’s economic development and improved educational access. Focused efforts to address CEFM also have made some impact, with particular progress over the past 25 years in many UNICEF CEFM priority districts (UNICEF, 2020). Bangladesh’s progress overall in comparison to other high prevalence countries has been very strong (UNICEF, 2020).

The combined **advocacy** forces of international and domestic child marriage leaders helped prevent a lowering of Bangladesh’s legal age of marriage in 2015. Pressure from donors also has pushed the government to move forward on a costed National Action Plan, and its soon to be released monitoring & evaluation framework (Interview, 10/9). Bangladesh benefits from a strong women’s rights movement that has recently made headlines in street protests against



rape, including child rape (Dhaka Tribune, 2020). Youth clubs and organizations are becoming more common, organized by the government, INGOs and domestic groups for local level action and advocacy. One informant talked about their work with students to teach them how to use the law to engage with decision makers and prevent child marriage (Interview, 10/5).

Bangladesh has a strong capacity for **research**, with icddr,b and BRAC University as key domestic research organizations on child marriage. International efforts have generated new findings on what works best in Bangladesh, such as Population Council's four-year study of the BALIKA project (Amin et al., 2016) and CARE's evaluation of Phase I of its Tipping Point project (CARE, 2019). The Gender & Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) project has conducted research and analyses on adolescents in Bangladesh, including extensive research in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar, and a political economy analysis of the National Adolescent Health Strategy. UNICEF recently released a report using MICS and DHS data to illustrate critical factors surrounding child marriage in the country, including division-level data (UNICEF, 2020).

**Programs** around child marriage in the last 25 years have succeeded in educating communities about the risks of child marriage, in particular, the health risks. The large-scale stipend program for girls' secondary education created gender parity in school attendance, although not school completion. Small scale projects have begun incorporating focus on girls' empowerment, rights, and social norms, like the BALIKA project, which reduced child marriage by one-third (Amin et al., 2016). An evaluation of CARE's Tipping Point project found that their focus on changing social norms succeeded in improving girls' mobility and parent-child relationships, and there was anecdotal evidence of averted marriages (CARE, 2019). Instead of emphasizing the negative consequences of child marriage, CARE's approach focuses on the benefits of not marrying children young (Interview, 10/5). One informant talked about the growing emphasis on gender-transformative approaches, with the government using mixed boys-girls clubs to talk about the importance of girls' education. She added, "We focused predominantly on service delivery, but for long-lasting change, you have to bring in the angle of transformation" (Interview, 10/9).

### Obstacles to Progress

Although Bangladesh has undoubtedly made progress against CEFM over the past 25 years, it has lagged behind the declines in other countries in South Asia (UNICEF, 2020). Bangladesh has missed opportunities to make headway on child marriage in line with its economic gains. It will be increasingly important for the country to address these obstacles because contextual factors – such as economic crisis and sexual violence – threaten to erode progress. At the same time, to reach the national target of ending child marriage by 2041, progress must be eight times the current rate.

Bangladesh appears to lack the political will to tackle child marriage systematically, despite **advocacy** efforts. Part of this is due to shrinking political space for youth and women's rights activists. GAGE's PEA on the National Adolescent Health Strategy pointed out that were able

We learn early on that you cannot debate with your parents. And this discourages youth movements.

– Interview, 9/15

to influence policy formation, but now "CSOs are restricted to providing policy support and collaborating with the government on implementation" (Sultan & Nazneen, 2018). Their report also found growing conservatism around sexuality and adolescent rights, threatening to derail any attempts to shift social norms

on these issues. One informant said the government has become "very authoritarian," and will listen to the UN, but not CSOs and INGOs. While CSOs can be silenced by threatening their registration, MOWCA avoids involving INGOs altogether, "because they know that they will speak up to the government (Interview, 10/9). Weakness in MOWCA also affects accountability efforts. An informant worried that once MOWCA is responsible for the National Action Plan's monitoring & evaluation framework, "it will die" (Interview, 10/9). There is some coordinated advocacy through Girls Not Brides, but women's groups and youth groups do not appear to have a coordinated advocacy strategy at the national or local level. One informant (unaffiliated with an organization) said, "we need to strengthen civil society, led by the women's movement, women's community-based organizations, we need to invest and extend them" (Interview, 9/15).

There are still prominent gaps in **research** that hinder understanding and effective child marriage strategies (Amin et al., 2020). The progress on sub-national data is important, but there is little to no information about what works in each division. For example, there is no research showing why Sylhet is such a positive outlier on child marriage progress (Interview, 9/16). Another gap is the lack of documentation of social norms, how they are shifting, and whether investments like jobs programs affect norms (Interview, 9/30). Another informant said that more longitudinal data is needed, although it is challenging to track girls due to frequent migration (Interview, 9/16). One study found that information on younger adolescents and marginalized groups (such as girls with disabilities) is very scarce (Stravropolou et al., 2017). ICRW/Plan also identified research gaps, including self-initiated marriages (ICRW/Plan). Many academic institutions in Bangladesh are not pursuing this issue, although they have the capacity. One informant said, "There are women's studies, gender studies, but their voice is not linking with the people's voice" (Interview, 9/16)

**Programs** addressing CEFM remain siloed and piecemeal efforts, due to lack of coordination and limited scale. One informant noted that there are "interesting" organizations working on the issue, "but all are chipping away separately" (Interview, 9/18). Intersectoral coordination is especially needed at the district and local level, as government officials there are positioned to understand and address the needs of their communities (Interview, 10/9). There was frustration among some informants that so many programs don't address root causes, and that they lack innovation (Interviews, 9/16, 10/5, 10/9). One informant said programs focus too much on service delivery over rights-based approaches, and they need more emphasis on norms change and systematically engaging men and boys (Interview, 10/9). Another said that there need to

be more “youth-focused, youth-led approaches that are holistic, trusting in youth agency” (Interview, 10/5). This informant was discouraged that bigger organizations were starting their own youth groups, instead of investing in existing groups (Interview, 10/5). Many informants and the literature discussed the important of addressing violence, with one informant saying that every child marriage program “needs to address GBV” (Interview, 10/9).

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this PEA support the following conclusions and recommendations:

### A. What is the case for investment in CEFM in Bangladesh?

- **Bangladesh would benefit from a combination of actors pushing for increased political will.** As it works to recover from COVID-19, government resources and attention will be further distracted from reducing CEFM. Bangladesh has shown that it responds to international encouragement, and a positioning of anti-CEFM efforts as a critical recovery strategy could move the issue higher up on the agenda. Investment in existing organizations at this juncture can build momentum around the National Action Plan.
- **Bangladesh could provide rich and important lessons on CEFM.** CEFM does not closely follow anticipated patterns in Bangladesh, with poverty, schooling, and female employment showing less of an impact than other countries. Strong social norms and beliefs around female sexuality and worth, including violence against girls and perceptions around the risk of rape and resulting family shame, are important in continuing the cycle of CEFM. There is an urgency for new approaches that address GBV and social norms, which could also provide a rich set of learnings.

### B. Where are the key points of leverage on CEFM in Bangladesh?

- **The costed National Action Plan and its monitoring and evaluation framework can be leveraged for improved multi-sectoral coordination.** The creation of the Plan in 2018 was an important benchmark, and the release of its monitoring & evaluation framework in 2020 could facilitate its translation into a meaningful roadmap for accelerated action to address CEFM across government ministries.
- **Bangladesh-based development and research experience can be mobilized for increased progress.** Bangladesh-based organizations have had some success with child marriage interventions, providing important examples of domestic-led work. Research institutions have the capacity to fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge around child marriage, particularly on the factors that are affecting differential progress rates.
- **Subnational data provides improved clues on regional differences.** While not showing the full picture of why regional disparities in CEFM exist, improved subnational data collection is an important first step in understanding the disparate drivers and contextual circumstances that mitigates or sustains CEFM in divisions, districts, and villages.

### C. Where can investment/influence turn gaps into opportunities?

- **Investing in rights-based civil society groups can help ensure girls' voices are central.** Women's groups and youth-led groups need to have a stronger voice in setting the direction of anti-CEFM efforts at a national and local level, and they have a history of activism around gender-based violence. The Girls Not Brides network provides important groundwork for coordinated action. National-level advocacy is critical to pushing back against conservative framing of CEFM, and to holding the government to account for

implementation of the National Action Plan. Advocacy coordination at the local level should include improvements to the Standing Committees for Women and Children to prevent and address child marriage.

- **The Ministry of Women’s and Children’s Affairs is critical to reducing CEFM and needs strengthening.** MOWCA currently has limited capacity to convene other ministries and ensure implementation of the National Action Plan. The institutional strengthening of this body should focus on improving its internal tracking of the monitoring & evaluation framework and encouraging its consultation with civil society.
- **A cross-sectoral body that works at national and subnational levels can improve strategic coordination.** Government agencies, donors, implementing organizations, researchers, and advocates appear to be addressing CEFM in an uncoordinated way that can generate misunderstanding, resentment, confusion, and inefficiencies. Current consultative bodies include only some of these actors, missing an opportunity for a fully coordinated approach.

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## APPENDIX A. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

### KII Interview Guide – Bangladesh

**Introduction:** *Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. Iris Group is conducting Political Economy Analyses on Child, Early and Forced Marriage. Our purpose is to develop a high-level analysis of the CEFM context in each of eight countries. You have been recommended as an expert in Bangladesh on this issue, and we greatly appreciate your input in this process. Your responses will help shape a contextual understanding of CEFM in Bangladesh, which in turn will contribute to recommended responses. Your specific responses will not be attributed to you without your consent. We are very grateful for your honest responses.*

First, can you give me a brief summary of your work in Bangladesh related to CEFM?

#### Foundational Factors

From what you know based on your work or experiences, what are the most important factors driving **regional differences** in CEFM in Bangladesh? (probe for geographical, environmental differences)

In what ways, if any, does **economic class** influence CEFM rates and practices in Bangladesh?

How have **ethnic differences** shaped CM and other gender issues in Bangladesh? Do different regions track to different cultural values and/or ethnicities?

How has historical gender inequality affected CEFM?

#### Rules of the Game

How does Bangladesh law affect CEFM?

How do international commitments affect laws or policy in Bangladesh on CEFM?

What are the most common social norms related to CEFM? How much do these differ among different ethnic groups?

Have there been **any recent norms changes** related to gender, fertility desires, familial responsibility and sexual debut? Have these been reflected in CM rates?

### Here and Now

Who are the **key stakeholders and actors on CEFM**? (probe for donors, CSOs, policymakers, advocates)? Are there any outstanding champions on this?

What role do Bangladeshi women's rights and youth groups play on the issue?

What influence do **international NGOs, institutions and donors** have on CEFM in Bangladesh?

What are the limitations of their influence?

Is CEFM progress **driven mainly by actors outside Bangladesh or inside Bangladesh**? Is there tension between external and internal actors? Do communities see it as a domestically driven issue?

What role does **media** in Bangladesh play in CEFM?

**Is CEFM linked with other issues** at the national level (e.g., education, economics, sexual rights and reproductive health, HIV, HTP etc.) or addressed as a separate issue? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working on CEFM through these lenses?

How do you think **COVID-19** affects CEFM and efforts to combat it?

What **global, regional or national events** have been important to CEFM in Bangladesh in the past couple years?

### **Dynamics**

Where are the gaps (in programming, research, advocacy)? Where can these gaps be converted into opportunities?

What **progress** has been made on CEFM in Bangladesh? (*probe for programmatic, research, advocacy*)

What and who are the **biggest obstacles** for current CEFM efforts in Bangladesh? (*probe for programmatic, research and advocacy challenges*) Have these changed over time?

Is there anyone else you think it's important for me to speak to about this issue? Are there any materials you can share that might help us understand these contextual issues better?