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## Exploring the Social Consequences of Child Marriage on Girls: Insights from Rural Naogaon District in Bangladesh

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the social consequences of child marriage on girls in Kolmudanga, Uttar Patary and Boldiaghat villages at Patari Union of Naogaon District, Bangladesh. In this study, we applied qualitative research methods because of study area related limitations. In this case Data were collected employing case studies, focus group discussions and document analysis. 35 respondents (31 female and 4 male) were selected by snowball sampling techniques. The findings shows that social repercussions of child marriage, including high rates of divorce, post-marital affairs and remarriage as well as impoverishment, marital rape, and family violence. Among 35 respondents the average age of marriage was 13 years (the average age of female respondent was 11 years where male 15), the lowest age of girls were 10 (four cases) and boys were 14 years old (two cases). Nine cases of this study had divorce for one or more times, where five cases have remarriage which is an alarming trend in the study area. Marital rape, dowry and domestic violence are responsible for divorce in the study area. There was a relationship among divorce, post marital affairs and remarriage. High number of divorces plays in post marital affairs which often contributes to remarriage. Because of multiple divorce, romantic relationships and repeated marriage, girls are becoming stigmatized both within their families and in society, which is significantly affecting their mental and social beauty or social well-being. Child marriage poses a major obstacle to social equality at Patari union in rural Naogaon District of Bangladesh. The findings serve as valuable insight for academics and policymakers indicating the way of effective plans and program regarding effects of child marriage. Ultimately, the study makes a significant contribution to the realization of sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly goal 5, which promotes gender equality, and goal 10, which focuses on reducing inequalities. Eliminating child marriage will help create a safer, more equitable, and promising future for Bangladeshi girls.

### INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an institution which permitted or allowed a man and a woman to live together, have intercourses, and raise a family by social, religious, and legal way (Islam *et al.*, 2024). Child marriage, On the other hand, refers to a union between boys and girls under the age of eighteen years (Parson *et al.*, 2016). By this practice children are severely deprived of their childhood and their human rights are violated (Chowdhury, 2004). Worldwide an estimated 650 million girls and women are thought to have married before turning 18 years old. (UNICEF, 2020), in developing countries, one in three girls marry before the age of 18 where one in five girls marry before the age of 15 (UNFPA, 2016). In over the world, Bangladesh is one of the highest rates of child marriage (59%) and the highest rate within South Asia (Antu *et al.*, 2022). There are over 38 million child brides, many of whom get married before they turn 15 and 51% of young women get married before they turn 18 in Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2020). During the COVID-19 epidemic, situation have gotten worse. According to UNFPA data, over the previous year, the number of weddings among girls between the ages of 15 to 19 increased by 10% in 2021, for a two-year total increase of 27% (Prothom

Alo, 2022). Child marriage creates gender discrimination and inequality in education by causing school dropouts, particularly among girls. It is also obstacle to women empowerment (Abera, *et al.*, 2020). In rural Bangladesh, child marriage has barriered to women's empowerment which is obstacle to fulfill the sustainable development goal no 5 (Islam *et al.*, 2024). Child marriage has multiple impacts, including social, economic, physical, psychological, legal, health-related, as well as climatic and environmental effects. This study aims to explore only social consequences of child marriage at Patari union of Naogaon district in Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative research methodology has been applied in this study. To collect data focus group discussions, case studies, and document analysis have been applied in this study to examine the societal ramifications of child marriage at three villages of Patari Union in the Naogaon District. Techniques including observations, conversation analysis, interview, key informant interviews and tools such as check list, recorder have also been used in this study. Using snowball sampling technique 35 respondents have been selected. When respondents cannot be found and

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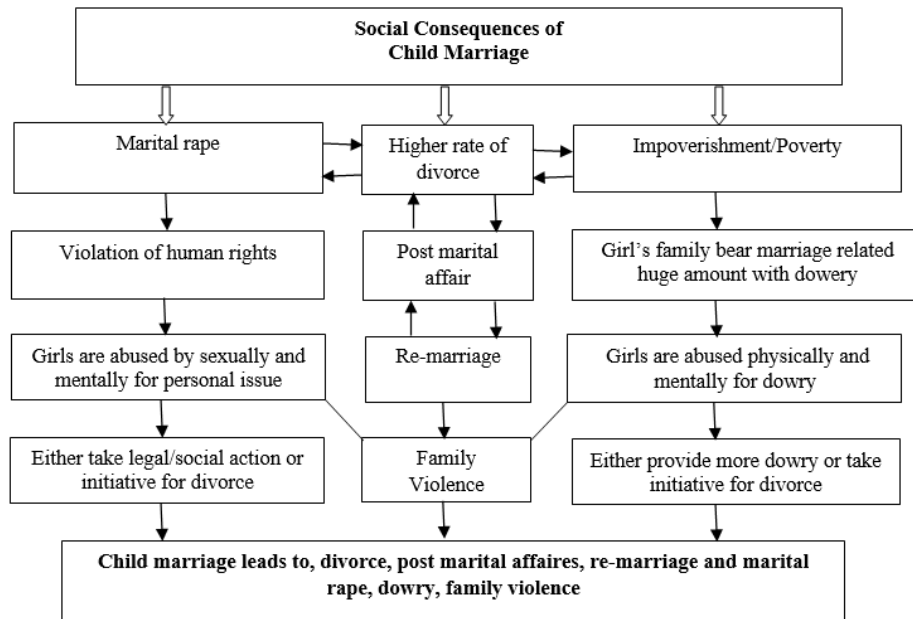
one has to rely on a known individual to gather data about others in this case snowball sampling technique is used. In our case, Because of some limitations like religious and agriculture based rural remote area etc. we had to applied snowball sampling technique to select sample size as well as due to time limitations we could not take more than 35 respondents. Although it was difficult to find out more respondents than 35, Because, There was no authentic list of child marriage in Patary Union parishad and marriage registry office. We had to collect the respondent list from married girls or boy's schools based on the dropout list from school attendance sheet. It was all but impossible for us search everyone, In this regard, representative from ActionAid Bangladesh assisted us to find out the respondent. We had to search one's marriage information to another of his or her school friend, senior or junior or kin relationships persons. To identify the root cause of child marriage, the study area was purposefully chosen as Kolmudanga, Uttar Patary, and Bodiaghat village at Patari Union of Naogaon because of its high vulnerability to child marriage in Bangladesh as part of action research of Actionaid Bangladesh. We were asked to find out the root cause of child marriage, analyze its effects and provide possible recommendations for its prevention. . It is important to note that this area is located adjacent to the Indian border which remote, agriculture-based rural region. Here Child marriage is deeply religious and supportive by a strong large number of people. As a result, Very few individuals actively oppose child marriage, Even local political representatives are unwilling to oppose child marriage for fare of losing votes. only a small number advocate for its prevention. Those who try to prevent it often face significant social pressure. In such a social environment, conducting research on child marriage was extremely risky for us. Initially, about the issue or provide any information weren't spoken willing by anyone. Because, most of the child marriages in the study area was not officially certified and often kept secret the identity of the officiating cleric (Moulvi). Therefore, in spite of the intention and preparation, Due to the surrounding circumstances data could not collect through survey methods. Upon entering the village, we quickly realized that any disclosure could pose a threat to the researcher's safety as we let the community know that we were researching child marriage. Consequently, Data had been collected cautiously and somewhat secretly. We were committed that their personal information would not be disclosed or used for any purpose other than the research. Anyway, it is not easy to identify the households where child marriages had occurred, it's also difficult to expect accurate information even if such households were found. Collected data ware been tabulated and presented through thematic analyses where family was been selected as unit of analyses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature on the societal ramifications of child marriage indicate that each study has focused on a specific sides of child marriage . Islam *et al.* (2024) identified the effects of child marriage on education and health in rural Bangladesh. They showed that the effects of child marriage comprise an increasing dropout rate, deprivation of education and gender inequality, loss of physical and mental health, malnutrition, increased risk of maternal and child mortality and long term health disease. As Khanam and Kabir (2023) stated that in order to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, at least eight child marriages in Bangladesh need to end. Ernawati *et al.* (2022) find the effects of child marriage on rural residents' economic standing, psychological well-being, and health based on the causes of child marriage. Climate change has a major influence on child marriage, as stated by Islam and Ahmed (2021). They point out that child marriage is one of the major effects of climate change on Bangladesh most vulnerable adolescent girls, according to UNICEF. Patoary (2020) discussed six implications of child marriage in his research. These include: school dropouts, health issues, economic issues, demographic issues, the rise of the dowry system in society, and obstacles to the nation's socioeconomic progress. Ani (2020) emphasizes the negative impacts of an early marriage on a woman's physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, as well as health issues and violations of her right to an education. Abera *et al.* (2020) described that how early marriage negatively affected women's empowerment whereas delaying marriage provides significant benefits. Child marriage has an impact on children's physical, social, and financial lives, according to a study by Sayed *et al.* (2019). It was elucidated by Yount *et al.* (2016) that the likelihood of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women is increased by child marriage. Bangladesh exhibits highest rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) and child marriage before the age of 15 years old. On the subject, the main topics of the majority of the literature were the economic, educational, environmental, physical, and psychological implications of child marriage. Although a few researchers have explored limited social consequence of child marriage-like domestic or family violence, a notable gap in the literature persists that how experiences like divorce, extramarital relationships and remarriage among early married girls can result in social stigma or losses social values with mental pressure. This study attempts to explore area and contribute to filling the research gap.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (Figure-1) focuses on the social factors created by child marriage which are interconnected with each other especially divorce, post marital affairs, remarriage and marital rape, dowry, family violence.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework of the social consequences of child marriage and its interrelationships

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study identifies a number of societal repercussions of child marriage that have a significant impact on people, families, and society as a whole. Among these outcomes, high divorce rates, post-marital affairs, remarriage, poverty, family violence, and marital rape and human rights violations have become commonplace trends. The prevalence of child marriage among both boys and girls has been determined by this study. Of the 35 instances that were analyzed, four were male and 31 were female. Among 35 respondents the average age of getting Marriage for the 31 female respondents were 11 years, with the youngest being 10 and the oldest being 17. Among the victims of child marriage four were married at 10 years, where seven at 11, six at 12, seven at 13, five at 14, three at 15, two at 16, and one at 17 years. Two of them, a male named Zamal (pseudonym) and a girl named Mitu (pseudonym), (had three previous marriages. To ensure the confidentiality of the individuals, pseudonyms have been used for all respondents in this paper. It was really puzzling that many of these people had not even reached puberty when they were married. Because of this, there are frequent reports of human rights abuses including marital rape in the area. The study found that early marriage age, dowry customs, and substance misuse are the main causes of domestic violence. In addition, a rural religious setting, persistent gender-based violence, and easy access to mobile phones, the internet, Indian television series, and jobs in garment factories for both boys and girls have all led to an increase in child marriage, remarriage, divorce, and post-marital affairs. For an example, we would like to mention a story of a boy and a girl' post marital relationships. Farid (pseudonym) 16. He is in class nine; six months ago, he got married. Now his wife is pregnant, she is 13 years old now. They had a romantic relation. The girl married before two times

with someone who was 12- or 10-years senior to her so she couldn't cop there and had divorce. She came back and admitted in the school again. They had their first introduce through mobile phone. Farid's parents weren't willing Farid to marry here. But as the bride's side agrees to pay dowry then they agreed. During marriage their condition was to continue study. But just after marriage his wife left school and now Farid also wants to leave school. The fact of the family of Farid's wife indicate that Poor families are becoming even poorer as a result of their daughters being married off several times. These results highlight the complex and interconnected detrimental effects of child marriage. A detailed discussion of the key social consequences of child marriage is presented below:

**Higher Rate of Divorces, Post Marital Affairs and Re-Marriages**

Divorce, re-marriage and post marital affair are interlinked in the study area (Figure 1). There has been a notable increase in the divorce rate in Kolmudanga and throughout the Patari Union. The divorce rate has a remarkable change in Kolmudanga and in all over the Patari Union. Ferdous and Bhuiyan (2018) said, in the traditional society, divorce was seen as the symbol of scandal and bad women. Dowry, drug addiction, losing beauty, illness, malnutrition, physical and mental abuse etc. are the main causes of divorce. The problems of divorce are universal and its aftermath depends on life style, religion, culture, social, psychological and economic sides (Mahmud, 2007). Post marital affaire is a vital cause of divorce and re-marriage in the study area.

Sakib 18 years old, is an agricultural labor, got married at the age of sixteen in the same village. He has experienced two divorces and is currently living with his third wife; she is 12 years old. He is drug addicted and to bearing the costs of drugs he demands more money from his

father-in-law. He beat his wife regularly. When he needs money, he sends her wife in his in laws house and threats of divorce. His wife is so ill and losing her beauty day by day (Case-34).

In this locality, drug addiction stands out as a primary cause of divorces. Prolonged physical abuse by an addicted husband often compels the wife to reluctantly opt for divorce in order to escape the continued mistreatment.

Sultana entered into marriage while she was in class five, marrying a 16-year-old boy from her own village. A few months after the marriage, Sultana discovered that her husband was addicted to drugs. When she confronted him about quitting, he responded with severe physical abuse. Enduring this for four months, Sultana eventually made the decision to separate (Case-10).

Another citable phenomenon in the study area is remarriage, and there appears to be a positive correlation between divorce and remarriage. Girls who experience divorce often seek to remarry at the earliest opportunity.

The age of Momena is 13 years old, got married first in class two, second in class three, and lastly, she had a romantic relation with another boy of class nine. For the third time she got married with the boy. Now she is pregnant. None of she and her husband has the possibility to continue study (Case-08).

Another notable fact in the study area is post marital affairs that is cause for many divorces, remarriage along with family conflict.

Farid, 16. He is in class nine; six months ago, he got married. Now his wife is pregnant, she is 13 years old now. They had a romantic relation. The girl married before two times with someone who was 12- or 10-years senior to her so she couldn't cop there and had divorce (Case-31).

Just as romantic relationships are responsible for child marriage, post marital affairs are also responsible for divorce. In recent year because of easy communication and transportation system and over expose to media have increased social insecurity. Availability and accessibility of modern technology and social media such as mobile phone, internet, computer, facebook, messenger, imo, satellite channel (Indian TV serial) and misuse of these technology and social media are responsible for increasing rate of child abuse (romantic relation, eve teasing, rape) and violence (family violence) both inside and outside of the family and that are responsible for increasing the rate of child marriage as well as divorce (Islam, 2021).

Mr Mostafizur Rahman, Assistant teacher of Boldiaghat Primary School said girls are getting marriage so earlier at the same time they are having divorce at the same rate and it's quite alarming. Those who getting divorce having remarriage as early as possible, very few of them come back to school again, few are coming back to their father's house and are not going to school again in preference they are going to garments and enjoying romantic relationship (KII-9).

In the context of this study, nine cases experienced divorce one or more times. These instances are highlighted in reference to their respective case numbers.

### **Impoverishment or Poverty Caused by Paying Dowry and Marriage Related Expenses**

Child marriage often initiates cycles of poverty for girls and their families, particularly in impoverished regions where such marriages are prevalent. It frequently marks the premature end of a girl's education, contributing to the perpetuation of poverty. In many cases, uneducated girls are at a higher risk of being subjected to child marriage. The correlation between child marriage and poverty is evident in specific regions of Bangladesh. Poverty becomes a motivating factor for arranging early marriages, particularly for daughters. High poverty rates correlate with high child marriage rates, while improved financial conditions lead to lower child marriage rates (Islam *et al.*, 2018).

Dowry, a common practice in the context, intensifies the link between poverty and child marriage, particularly affecting the poorest in the population. Child brides, often with limited income options, tend to have more children, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Additionally, the use of bride money contributes to economic challenges for both the groom's and bride's families, further deepening poverty in the community. The financial strain arising from dowry payments and the addition of new family members increases expenses, pushing families into greater poverty. We have found several cases

Salma<sup>12</sup>. She is from the Muchi Para of Kolmudanga. Her parents married her off far from the village. They paid a dowry of Tk. 200000. Salma wasn't agreeing with the marriage, her parents pressurized her in marriage. She wanted to study more, but now she has to involve in all household works (Case-24).

In the study area, paying dowry with marriage related other cost and cost for multiple marriage often push families into poverty.

Zamal, 16 years old, from Kolmudanga. His parents married him off two times only for dowry. Zamal was only 14 when he married for the first time. And the bride was only 11. Zamal's mother didn't behave well with his wife. The girl couldn't maintain all household works. Finally, she decided to be separated. After having a divorce from there, Nahid's parents start looking for another bride for him (Case-27).

Marufa, 17 years old. She got married when she was in class eight. She was brilliant and wanted to study more. She had to do a lot of work in her in law's house. She didn't get her desired respect in the family. Her mother-in-law used to neglect her and disturbed her many ways. After one year they demand additional dowry from her family. They sent her back to her father's house. Her fathers didn't have the ability to give more money to them. So Marufa has divorce. She has admitted herself again in the Madrasah. Now she wants to continue her study again (Case-14).

### **Family Violence**

Child marriage can be viewed as a form of violence against girls, encompassing physical, emotional, and

sexual dimensions, with severe repercussions for their physical and mental well-being, including reproductive health (Amin 2014; Solotaroff & Pande 2014; Parsons *et al.*, 2016). The heightened vulnerability of child brides extends to an increased risk of various forms of violence within their marital homes, inflicted by their husbands' families and in-laws (UNICEF, 2014). In the study area, dowry and drug-related family violence are prevalent.

Sultana, married in her village at the age of five, wedded a 16-year-old boy. When her parents inquired about her opinion, she agreed to the marriage to avoid suspicions of an affair elsewhere. Discovering her husband's drug addiction a few months into the marriage, she faced physical abuse when attempting to convince him to quit. Enduring this for four months, she eventually decided to separate (Case-10).

The experiences of Mitu and Setu from the study area echo and support the aforementioned discussions.

Mitu, 16 years old, has three more sisters. Mitu got married for the first time when she was in class 4, with one of her neighbors, but couldn't continue for some family conflict between the two families (Case-15).

Setu, 20, got married when she was in class three. Now she has two children. At first there was conflict always with her husband and other family members. Gradually she copes with the situation (Case-23).

### Marital Rape and Violation of Human Rights

Marital rape and the violation of human rights are prominent concerns among early-married women. Marital rape is a violation of human rights on women just like rape with an unmarried woman. It is a crime (Sarova, 2018). Child marriage constitutes a violation of children's rights, human rights also. Although the term marital rape may be unfamiliar to many, it is unfortunately prevalent, particularly among children who are married at an early age. According to Malhora and Elnakib (2021), child marriage is associated with forced marital sex, a lack of involvement in spouse selection, lower levels of autonomy, and diminished decision-making capabilities (99, 168–172). A correlation between child marriage and experiences of forced and unwanted sex is identified by research conducted by santhya *et al.* in Gujarat and west Bengal, India. Erulkar *et al.*'s (2013) study in Ethiopia explored that woman who got married before the age of 15 had been experiencing forced in first sex with their spouse four times, while those got married between 15-17years had faced twice the odds compared to those whose got married at the age of 18-19 (168). Md. Mozaffar Hossain, UP Member of 2 no. Patary union parishad, Shapahar, Naogaon told us, Women or girls are not secure here, such as, one married man has raped two women, and at the same time and he feels proud for conduction such kind of work. A meeting was held for this but he received no punishment. Eve teasing is also a threat for girls here. Not only outside the family, are the girls not safe within the house. We have identified seven cases related to marital or forced sex. Each of the story is

extremely shocking. A summary of each case is presented below:

Babita, 13 years old. Got married first in 8 years old, second in 9, and lastly she had a romantic relation with another boy of class nine. For the third time she got married with the boy. Now she is pregnant. None of she and her husband has the possibility to continue study. And now Florida is ill. She had very bad experience about marital life when she married for the first time. The first husband was 12 years senior than her. She said "At first I didn't understand what marriage is. It was so painful for me to have physical relation for the first time. I become ill and couldn't walk for few days. And my husband wasn't as romantic as I wanted. I couldn't do all household works as I was so young" (Case-8).

Sultana, 13 years old. When she got married in the last year, she was only in class three. She has three more sisters. So, her parents have the tendency to marry them as early as possible. Sultana's husband had another wife who committed suicide. He is 32 now. Sultana afraid of his husband, she cannot speak fluently before him, even not before other members of the in laws family. So the family members think Sultana is an abnormal girl. They abuse her many ways, she has to do all household works, and she has to obey her husband. All the time she is in fear. She doesn't want to have physical relation with her husband, sometimes he insists her in it. She is becoming sick day by day. Her parents came to bring her back to her father's house for some days but she didn't get the permission to go. Her parents are now so much concern about her, but they have nothing to do now and her parents looking for better groom for her 12 years old sister (Case-32).

Moina, 14, UttorPatari, lovely got married three years before. Her husband was 10 years senior than her so it was too painful for her to have physical relation with her husband. He uses to torture her every night. He abused her sometimes physically, sexually, sometimes mentally (Case-2).

Sultana real age 10 from Uttor Kolmudanga, Hothat Para, but she is shown older than that birth in registration card. Got married few months ago with a divorced man. Jinatun lives with her grandmother and her father is no more. She hasn't her period yet. The man forced her in sexual relation but she was scared. So now she doesn't want to continue the relation. But she was victimized with marital rape by her husband (Case-4).

Taslina, Boldiaghat, now in class six in the Girls School of Kolmudanga. She got married three years ago, but she stayed in her in laws house only for one day then divorced. She was so scared about making physical relation with her husband. And she was forced to have sexual relation. Now she doesn't want to talk about the matter (Case-5).

Nishat, 13 years old, She got married when she was in class four. She had a marital rape by her husband. So, she denied continuing the relationship. She got a divorce from there. She came back and again admitted into the school. After one year when she was in class five, her parents

again married her off, with a farmer in neighboring village (Case-17).

Fatema,13. Got married when she was in class four in UttorPatari Government Primary School. Her teachers wanted to protect the marriage, but they failed. Her husband was 10 years older than her. She was scared of physical relation with her husband, and abused by her husband. She couldn't tell this to anybody. After some month she denied to continue there. Finally, she had a divorce. She came back to the school and attended the PSC exam. Now she is in class six. (Case 25)

In the study area, instances of child rights violations, such as rape, marital rape, and eve-teasing, occur sporadically that creates insecurity in the study area. Many participants reported a lack of consent and autonomy in their sexual and reproductive lives. Child brides, often lacking awareness and legal protection, are particularly vulnerable to coercive sexual relations and abuse within marriage.

## CONCLUSION

This paper addresses the critical research problem of assessing the social impact of child marriage on girls at Patari union in rural Naogaon district of Bangladesh. The objective was to analyze social effects of child marriage, focusing on real scenario in rural Bangladesh. The key findings indicate that Child marriage has significantly contributed to the rising divorce rate in the study area. Many young divorced girls become involved in post-marital relationships, which often result in repeated cycles of divorce and remarriage, further complicating their social and emotional well-being. One another alarming factor that exacerbates the severity of child marriage in this area is the notable age gaps between child brides and their spouses. Due to the age gap, these young girls are more vulnerable to unconsented sexual activity and domestic abuse. When these girls marry young, they are more likely to be victims of serious and sometimes deadly marital violence. Early marriage victims frequently experience various forms of family violence, because they have no decision-making power, denial of fundamental human rights, and marital rape. These circumstances put them at risk for physical and psychological harm and maternal mortality also, in addition to undermining their autonomy and sense of dignity. The cycle of poverty and social instability is further exacerbated by these disturbances. The findings of this study will help policymakers and local government representatives to make marriage registration mandatory and ensure that divorces are conducted through legal way. These measures can contribute to eliminate child marriage and lowering the divorce rate.

This study was an action research project operated by ActionAid, with a specific focus on identifying the root causes of child marriage in Patari Union, Sapahar, Naogaon. As a result, the effects of child marriage received limited attention, which remains a key limitation. Time, budget, and geographical constraints also restricted the scope, sample size, and methodology. To

comprehensively address child marriage, a large-scale government-led action research initiative is essential; otherwise, rural women will continue to lag behind in education, gender equality, and empowerment. This study focuses on girl's child marriage but another study can be conducted at Patari union on boys's child marriages and A research need to be conducted about divorce and remarriage in a large scale. However, To eliminate child marriage from Patari union our recommendations are: Government must launce awareness campaigns indicating its harmful effects through culturally relevant media like dramas, short films, bioscope and mobile shows; Government, NGOs and INGOs must organize regular basis seminars, workshops, and courtyard meetings for consciousness of the villagers about child marriages; Furthermore, local child marriage prevention committees comprising educated youth, teachers, local political leaders and socially and economically influential community members should be formed to actively prevent child marriages and support law enforcement in taking legal actions.

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