

Institution: University of Kent		
Unit of Assessment: 16: Economics and Econometrics		
Title of case study: Improving the Capacity of Non-Profit Organisations to Shape Programmes and Policies for the Prevention of Female Early Marriage in Bangladesh		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: May 2013 to December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Names	Roles	Periods employed by submitting HEI:
Zaki Wahhaj	Reader in Economics	2012-present
Amrit Amirapu	Senior Lecturer in Economics	2015-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2016 to December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Research since 2013 by Zaki Wahhaj and Amrit Amirapu in the School of Economics at the University of Kent has provided new insight and evidence on the drivers and consequences of early marriage in Bangladesh. It has enabled non-profit organisations to: (i) engage with and shape policy debates at the national level on strategies for eliminating the practice (Population Council, BLAST); and (ii) develop an internationally funded intervention to provide adolescent girls in rural Bangladesh with better legal protection against early marriage (MOMODa Foundation), on the basis of rigorous economic models and empirical evidence.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>The research on child marriage by Zaki Wahhaj and Amrit Amirapu, and the funded projects that supported their research, were conducted during a period of intense debate among policy-makers and other stakeholders in Bangladesh about effective strategies to tackle the practice. Bangladesh, a country of 160 million people, has one of the highest rates of female early marriage, with about 60% of women marrying before the age of 18. (The figure refers to the proportion of women between the ages of 20 and 24 who reported an age of first marriage below 18 in the 2014 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey.) In 2015, the Bangladesh Government introduced a controversial draft bill in Parliament that would increase the legal punishment for underage marriage, but also decriminalise child marriages in cases where a court deemed it in 'the best interest of the child'.</p> <p>In 2014, Wahhaj, in partnership with the University of Malaya and with funding from Australian Aid [G1], conducted a large-scale nationally representative survey of women in Bangladesh that provided detailed, up-to-date information on female marriage patterns, education, fertility, and employment. The survey data enabled Wahhaj, together with Dr Asadullah at the University of Malaya, to produce rigorous new evidence on the social effects of early marriage on individuals who marry at a young age [R1, R3] (period of research 2015-19). Their work made use of an empirical approach for estimating the causal impact of early marriage developed by Field and Ambrus (<i>Journal of Political Economy</i>, 2008) that involves instrumenting female age of marriage by age of onset of menarche. The work builds on this approach by making use of information on pairs of adult sisters – a unique feature of the Australian Aid-funded survey – and an estimation strategy involving family fixed-effects to take into account unobserved heterogeneity across</p>		

families. This innovative research approach confirmed previous estimates of the impact of early marriage on schooling and the onset of fertility, and produced new evidence of the effects of early marriage on two outcomes not hitherto investigated in the literature: the impact on social networks, and attitudes regarding traditional gender norms.

A key argument made by civil society organisations in Bangladesh against the Government's proposal to decriminalise early marriage in special circumstances is that it would make the practice more socially acceptable. To examine this argument, Amirapu, Asadullah, and Wahhaj conducted a set of field experiments in rural Bangladesh in which participants were informed about the Government's new child marriage law that had recently been approved in the national Parliament. The study was undertaken in 2018, with funding from UK Aid [G2, G3]. It found that the effects of the intervention depend on who within an adolescent girl's extended family is provided with the relevant legal information. In particular, the research team found a backlash effect of informing fathers and family elders about the law [R4] (period of research 2018-20). It is one of the first studies to investigate, within an experimental setting, whether the law can be used to change social norms in a developing country.

In related work, Wahhaj developed and empirically tested a theoretical model of marriage markets with overlapping generations to explain the drivers of early marriage [R2] (period of research 2013-18). Previous explanations of early marriage have assumed a preference for young brides within certain societies. The theoretical model discards this assumption but posits that there is imperfect information about the 'quality' of potential brides on the marriage market: postponing marriage sends a negative signal about one's quality as a potential suitor, reflected in dowry prices, thus providing parents with a financial incentive to marry off their daughters at a young age. The paper thus highlights that early marriage may be due not to an inherent cultural preference for young brides, but, at least in part, to informational problems on the marriage market that give rise to higher dowry demands for older brides. This insight suggests how a range of policy options, including interventions that expand opportunities for adolescent girls, can reduce financial pressures to marry at an early age.

3. References to the research

[R1] Asadullah, M. N., and Wahhaj, Z. (2016). 'Child Marriage Law and Freedom of Choice in Bangladesh', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 51:3. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/83773/>
<https://www.epw.in/journal/2016/3/commentary/child-marriage-law-and-freedom-choice-bangladesh.html>

[R2] Wahhaj, Z. (2018). 'An Economic Model of Early Marriage', *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 152, pp. 147-176. doi: 10.1016/j.jebo.2018.06.001.
<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/67187/>

[R3] Asadullah, M. N., and Wahhaj, Z. (2019). 'Early Marriage, Social Networks and the Transmission of Norms', *Economica*, 86, pp. 801-831. doi: 10.1111/ecca.12291.
<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/67552/>

[R4] Amirapu, A., Asadullah, M. N., and Wahhaj, Z. (2020). 'Can Child Marriage Law Change Attitudes and Behaviour?', *Economic Development and Institutions Working Paper*.
<https://edi.opml.co.uk/resource/can-child-marriage-law-change-attitudes-and-behaviour-experimental-evidence-from-an-information-intervention-in-bangladesh/>
<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/85768/>

R2 and R3 were initially made available as Kent Economics Discussion Papers in 2015 and 2016, respectively; earlier versions of R4 were made available as working papers in 2019 and 2020.

R1, R2, and R3 were funded by:

[G1] 'The Role of Secondary Schooling and Gender Norms in the Long-Term Opportunities and Choices of Rural Bangladeshi Women'. Australian Aid, 2013-16. Value: 576,000 Australian dollars. PI: Zaki Wahhaj.

R4 was funded by two grants from UK Aid through the Economic Development and Institutions (EDI) Programme (details below). EDI is a £15 million led by a group of internationally leading economists working on issues related to development and institutions. The research proposal included details of the experimental design that was approved by the EDI selection panel prior to the start of the fieldwork. **R4** was internally reviewed by the EDI team and released as an EDI working paper in 2020.

[G2] 'Child Marriage Law, Gender Norms and Marriage Customs'. Economic Development and Institutions (DfID Research Programme), 2017-19. Value: £35,000. PI: Zaki Wahhaj.

[G3] 'Peer Effects of Child Marriage Law on Marriage Customs'. Economic Development and Institutions (DfID Research Programme), 2018-20. Value: £19,500. PI: Zaki Wahhaj

4. Details of the impact

Research on female early marriage in Bangladesh by the submitting unit (Wahhaj, Amirapu) since 2013 has provided rigorous evidence on the drivers and consequences of early marriage in Bangladesh. It has enabled non-profit organisations to engage with, and shape, policy debates at the national level on strategies for eliminating the practice, and to develop an intervention to provide adolescent girls in rural Bangladesh with legal protection against early marriage.

In 2015, the Bangladesh Government introduced a controversial draft bill that would decriminalise child marriages in cases where a court deemed it in 'the best interest of the child'. A large swathe of non-governmental organisations working on children's rights and welfare opposed this move. In 2016, Wahhaj, together with co-investigator Asadullah at the University of Malaya, began a collaboration with two non-profit organisations – the Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust (BLAST) and the Population Council, New York – to articulate alternative strategies to tackle the issue of female early marriage, based on careful theoretical reasoning and research-based evidence. Population Council is one of the world's leading organisations in the design and evaluation of programmes aimed at the improvement of adolescent lives, including the elimination of early marriage **[f]**. BLAST is the largest legal services organisation in Bangladesh, providing legal aid to poor and disadvantaged clients, and pursuing public interest litigation cases before the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, including cases relating to gender rights **[g]**.

This collaboration produced policy-related commentaries that drew extensively on child marriage research at the submitting unit **[i]**. The commentaries were published in policy journals and electronic and print media, including the *IZA Policy Paper Series* (October 2016), *Economic and Political Weekly* (February 2017) **[a]**, *The Conversation* (March 2017), *Project Syndicate* (March 2017), and *Ideas for India* (April 2017). The commentaries in *The Economic and Political Weekly* **[a]** and *The Conversation* are key references on child marriage on Bangladesh provided by the organisation Girls Not Brides on its website **[b]**. (Girls Not Brides is an organisation initiated by The Elders in 2011 as a partnership of grassroots organisations around the world committed to ending the practice of child marriage.) The *IZA* policy paper served as a key reference for a consultation with child marriage experts co-organised by Population Council and BLAST in November 2016 **[c]**. The collaboration also led to formal discussions in Bangladesh on child marriage policy, co-organised by the research team, BLAST and Population Council, to explore strategies for tackling the issue using rigorous research-based evidence. Key stakeholders from the Bangladesh Government and a range of NGOs took part in the discussions, which received widespread media attention **[d, e, f, g]**.

This collaborative work enabled BLAST and Population Council to combine their own institutional knowledge regarding early marriage with the research generated by the submitting unit to propose innovative strategies for tackling the issue. According to Sajeda Amin, Senior Associate at Population Council: 'The evidence on current marriage practices in Bangladesh by Asadullah and Wahhaj (2016) [R1], and the conceptual work by Wahhaj (2015) [R2] helped inform the Population Council's own approach to tackling female early marriage in South Asia [...] their research improved our understanding of the context and economic drivers of early marriage in Bangladesh today, and enabled Population Council to make the case for empowering adolescent girls more effectively in policy discussions.' [f]

Sara Hossain, Executive Director of BLAST, wrote: 'The findings from these studies [R1, R4] provided timely evidence on awareness and understanding of child marriage law in rural Bangladesh and the extent to which it affects marriage practices in a rural setting [...] [and] has improved our understanding at BLAST of how the law affects social attitudes and practices related to female early marriage. [...] The evidence generated through the innovative research by Dr Wahhaj and his co-authors has been helpful for BLAST and other civil society organisations to influence public opinion, and government policy on tackling issues related to gender and child rights.' [g]

Since 2018, Wahhaj has collaborated with the MOMODa Foundation, a non-profit organisation that operates a range of social development programmes in northern Bangladesh, to design an intervention that 'sought to enhance the use of the existing national birth registration system and establish a helpline to monitor and prevent underage marriages among adolescent girls in rural Bangladesh'. [h]. The design was informed by Wahhaj's previous research, showing that the vast majority of early marriages in Bangladesh are due to family pressures [R1] stemming from fear that delaying marriage will lead to higher dowry demands [R2]. 'Thanks to the evidence and insights provided by Dr Wahhaj and his research team, MOMODa Foundation was able to make an effective case to international funders for an intervention [...] to help create and update birth registration records for children in rural Bangladesh.' [h]

MOMODa obtained an award of CAD 99,650 from Grand Challenges Canada to pilot the intervention in northern Bangladesh [j]. As scientific advisor to this project, Wahhaj also helped developed details of the intervention. In particular, based on the finding in [R4] that 'informing rural households in Bangladesh about the legal penalties for facilitating female early marriage can lead to backlash effects [...] because of entrenched traditional views about appropriate marriage age', Wahhaj advocated 'highlighting to parents in the project area the wider benefits of having verified birth registration certificates for adolescent daughters rather than focusing on child marriage prevention as its sole objective'. [h]. The project initiated a campaign to raise awareness about a Government helpline for reporting gender-based violence, and/or helped create or rectify birth registration records for adolescent girls, in a total of 180 rural communities (with a population of about 1,800 adolescent girls) [h].

According to MOMODa Foundation: 'The nuanced findings in Dr Wahhaj's research have helped ensure that the project implementation in northern Bangladesh is sensitive to prevailing traditional norms, and achieve near universal valid birth certificates among adolescent girls [by December 2020]. [...] we believe that the universal birth registration of adolescent girls and improved knowledge about the government's hotline for reporting gender-based violence in the project area will provide adolescent girls better protection against early marriage.' [h].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[a] Policy commentary: Amin, Asadullah, Hossain, and Wahhaj (2017). 'Can Conditional Transfers Eradicate Child Marriage?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(6).

<https://www.epw.in/journal/2017/6/commentary/can-conditional-transfers-eradicate-child-marriage.html>

[b] Policy commentary at Girls Not Brides Resource Centre.

<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resource-centre/can-conditional-transfers-eradicate-child-marriage/>

[c] Media coverage of consultation with experts on child marriage, co-organised by Population Council and SOKHI (News Hour).

[d] Media coverage of roundtable discussion on child marriage law organised by BLAST, Population Council, and the Universities of Kent and Malaya (the *Daily Star*).

<https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/roundtable-discussion-child-marriage-restraint-act-2017-1744420>

[e] Facebook Livestream of radio interview of Asadullah and Wahhaj and BLAST representative with Radio Channel Colours FM.

<https://www.facebook.com/Coloursfm1016/videos/378372676096319/>

[f] Testimonial by a Senior Associate at Population Council.

[g] Testimonial by the Executive Director of BLAST.

[h] Testimonial by the Executive Director of MOMODa Foundation.

[i] Website of Australian Aid project listing policy articles co-written with BLAST and Population Council (including republications). <https://www.integgra.org/cms/index.php/outputs/media-writings>

[j] Grant application and award letter for project on birth registration of adolescent girls, Grand Challenges Canada.