Child Marriage In Time of Crisis: Lessons Learnt from The Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the highest increase in the rate of child marriage in the last two decades and threatens the progress in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 of gender equity. To better grasp the determinant factors of child marriage during a pandemic, this review paper presents a comprehensive picture of the conditions and provides strategies to prevent them. We conducted literature searches in March 2023 in PubMed and Cochrane Library to gather studies on this issue. UNICEF predicted an additional 10 million adolescent girls facing the risk of child marriage due to the pandemic. However, the national prevalence of child marriage rate during the COVID-19 pandemic is still limited. This study found that the highest child marriage rate globally is in Sub-Saharan Africa (35%) and South Asia (29%), and India has the highest absolute number of girl brides (15.6 million). The evidence supports several factors contributing to child marriage: economic reasons, school closure, sociocultural influences, and lack of awareness towards the consequences. Child marriage is a human rights violence, risking the health and well-being of adolescent girls, robbing their childhood and chance to education, hence weakening two generations. Therefore, this study suggests that multidisciplinary collaboration between governments, schools, communities, and private sectors is essential to mitigate the risk of child marriage in vulnerable families in times of crisis. Keywords: child marriage, Covid-19 pandemic, crisis

1. Introduction
The rising trend of child marriage during the Covid-19 pandemic is very alarming. As many studies and policy advocates have previously warned, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only impacted various aspects of human life but has also brought gender inequalities that have affected children and adolescent girls in particular. For instance, local Bangladesh news reported the death of a 14-year-old girl who died within a month of her marriage due to excessive genital bleeding in October 2020 (Dhaka Tribune, 2020). In early 2022, another 14-year-old girl was reported to commit suicide because her family pressured her to marry a 40-year-old man (Dhaka Tribune, 2022).
During the pandemic or in times of crisis, adolescent girls in low socioeconomic communities were likely to be more affected by multiple consequences. They were forced into early marriage and at a higher risk of experiencing gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, leading to unintended pregnancies. As a manifestation of gender discrimination reflecting on the social norms, girls were also reported to have greater domestic responsibilities and drop out of school during the lockdown compared to boys (Kyeremateng et al., 2022; Shukla et al., 2023b). A study in Norwegian during the pandemic reported that adolescent girls were also significantly more at risk of experiencing all forms of abuse except physical abuse than boys, including psychological abuse, sexual abuse, online sexual abuse, and witnessing domestic violence (Augusti et al., 2021).

Additionally, statistics indicate that child marriage among girls is approximately six times more common than among boys globally. According to UNICEF, child marriage is defined as a formal or informal union between a child below 18 years old and an adult or another child. Before the pandemic, there was an estimated of 100 million girls were at risk of being married before turning 18 in the coming decade (UNICEF, 2022b). However, this situation has worsened, with an additional 10 million girls now facing the risk of child marriage due to the pandemic (UNICEF, 2022b). Despite a gradual decline in global child marriage rates over recent decades, this prediction represents the highest increase in the last 25 years (Cousins, 2020).

Child marriage spiked during the pandemic as a consequence of economic insecurity due to the loss of jobs and income, along with the increase in child labour and child exploitation (Gupta & Jawanda, 2020). This situation could worsen with the ongoing inflationary pressure and the Ukraine conflict exacerbating the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the World Bank, the rising cost of food and energy is a global concern that could push an additional 75-95 million people into poverty (Mahler et al., 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to take urgent measures to prevent children and especially adolescent girls from vulnerable families, from experiencing further exploitation.

This study aims to review the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the prevalence of child marriage, analyse the determinant factors and the impacts of child marriage, and further present possible strategies to prevent child marriage during the cost-of-living crisis, particularly in some countries with a high prevalence of child marriage.

2. Methodology
A literature search was conducted in March 2023 in PubMed and Cochrane Library using a combination of these terms (child marriage* OR forced marriage* OR early marriage*) AND (Covid-19 OR pandemic OR crisis) AND (exploitation OR abuse OR maltreatment). Relevant references were also searched manually from the included studies. Additional data on child marriage...
marriage prevalence and the current condition of the economic crisis were supported by Google searches on the UNICEF, Girls not Bride, and World Bank websites.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Prevalence of child marriage during the Covid-19 Pandemic

According to recent data from UNICEF, the highest child marriage rate was found in Sub-Saharan Africa (35%), followed by South Asia (29%). Niger has the highest child marriage rate (76%), which means three of four girls were married before the age of 18 years (UNICEF, 2022a). In terms of absolute numbers based on the population demographics, India has the most significant number of girl brides at approximately 15.6 million, followed by Bangladesh with 4.3 million. While the child marriage rate in Pakistan, Indonesia, and the Philippines are under 20%, these countries still rank in the top ten for the absolute number of child marriage globally (Girls not Brides, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the prevalence of child marriage, as it exacerbated difficulties in vulnerable populations and created additional pressure on the overburdened health and social service delivery system. An additional 500,000 child marriages and 1 million adolescent pregnancies were predicted to happen in a year after the pandemic started (Cousins, 2020). At the end of 2021, Bangladesh reported an increase in child marriage by at least 13% during the Covid-19 lockdown (Hossain et al., 2021). A survey in 21 districts of Bangladesh found that a total of 13886 child marriages happened only in the duration of 6 months, between March to September 2020 (Hossain et al., 2021). In Indonesia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs was reported to receive 34413 applications for underage marriage in January and June 2020, showing an increase of 45% compared to the same period in 2019 (Rahiem, 2021). However, the number may be underestimated as in reality, many child marriages in Indonesia were done religiously and did not register to the government until the brides reached the minimum age required (Rahiem, 2021).

3.2. Determinant Factors of Child Marriage During Pandemic

The determinant factors of child marriage may be very complex and vary between countries. In Asian countries, marriage is widely considered a social, religious, and cultural obligation, often ignoring the children's personal choice due to the patriarchal tradition and discrimination against girls. This section will further discuss the determinant factors of child marriage, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.2.1. Economic reason

Depending on their socioeconomic condition, families respond differently to income loss or economic hardship. Particularly in the economic and humanitarian crisis context, many studies show that child marriage practice was seen as a way to resolve their desperate economic
conditions. For instance, after the tsunami in Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka in 2004, there was an increase in forced marriage in girls aged 15-17 years, especially those who lost their parents so they could receive additional state aid and support for family (Kumala Dewi & Dartanto, 2019). In Bangladesh and Somalia, in times of food shortage and drought, girls are often perceived as a 'burden' for the household that must be discharged (Kumala Dewi & Dartanto, 2019). Families are often considered to invest more in sons than daughters in a difficult economic situation, so they choose to marry off their daughters (Afrin & Zainuddin, 2021).

According to a UNICEF report, poverty is strongly associated with child marriage. Females from the poorest quintile are 2.5 times more likely to get married in their childhood than those from the wealthiest quintile. In India, the median age for marriage is significantly lower for women from the poorest quintile (15.4 years) compared to the wealthiest quintile (19.7 years) (UNICEF, 2014). Parents marry off their daughters to relieve themselves of the burden of caring for them and to receive monetary benefits. In certain cultures where the groom must pay a bride's wealth to the girl's family, younger girls are often considered more valuable as they are assumed to have more time to dedicate to the family and bear more children (Afrin & Zainuddin, 2021). Conversely, younger brides are considered less expensive in cultures where the girl's family pays a dowry for the marriage (Afrin & Zainuddin, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many marriages are held by families from low socioeconomic backgrounds as they view social restrictions as an opportunity to have a simple wedding celebration without spending much money.

3.2.2. School closure

Long-term school closure is one critical factor causing the spike in child marriage during the pandemic. Being at school can help protect girls from forced marriage, not only by keeping them busy but also by having the support and help from friends and teachers to oppose the family if they are being forced into marriage (UNICEF, 2022b). Not only does school closure increase the risk of forced marriage, but it also increases the vulnerability of girls to get physical and sexual abuse by both their peers or unemployed older men as the girls are often at home unsupervised (Afrin & Zainuddin, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). 47% of adolescent victims of online sexual abuse were experiencing it for the first time during the pandemic, as they spent more time online (Augusti et al., 2021). Some families with economic vulnerability struggled to keep up with the technological devices and internet needed to follow the class, forcing millions of girls to drop out of school (UNESCO, 2022). A study in Kenya showed that adolescent secondary schoolgirls who experienced school closure for six months had three times the risk of dropping out of school and twice the risk of becoming pregnant compared to similar girls graduating before the Covid-19 lockdown (Zulaika et al., 2022).

3.2.3. Child marriage as a consequence of sociocultural dynamics
Traditional belief is also one factor that provokes parents to marry their children early. In some communities, early marriage was considered a way to avoid adultery and premarital sex (Kumala Dewi & Dartanto, 2019). This may also be a rationale for parents to maintain their religious principle, as the countries with the highest child marriage rate have the majority of Muslim populations, such as Niger (98.3%) and Bangladesh (90.4%) (Rahiem, 2021). In Bangladesh, there was an increase in incidents of rape, sexual violence, and unwanted physical contact reported during the pandemic, causing parents to feel insecure and marry off their daughters as a way to protect them (Afrin & Zainuddin, 2021). Aside from the pandemic consequences, two studies in Indonesia mentioned some longstanding beliefs that women who have not married by age twenty are considered spinsters and a burden for the family (Rahiem, 2021; Wibowo et al., 2021). The same studies also found a myth that if a girl declines a marriage proposal, they will be more likely to be an old maid. At the same time, there is also a perception of bad luck and prosperity if a woman marries late or stays single, and that early marriage can help protect the family's reputation.

3.2.4. Lack of awareness towards the consequences of child marriage
Along with the longstanding sociocultural influences that promote early marriage, another reason that child marriage is still a persistent problem is the lack of awareness regarding the long-term consequences of child marriage. Parents' literacy and education level were found to be significant determinants in deciding the age of marriage. A study in India found that of those who got married before the age of 18 years, 46% had illiterate fathers, and 77% had illiterate mothers (Sandhu & Geethalakshmi, 2017). A study in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, one of the regions with the highest rate of child marriage, found that one out of four parents and adolescents agreed that once a child reached puberty, they considered being ready to get married, despite their age (Wibowo et al., 2021). However, a qualitative study with adolescent girls in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, found that most early marriages during the pandemic came from the adolescent's willingness. Due to the high stress and boredom from an online school and the increased responsibility to do house chores during lockdowns, some teenagers expressed that marriage is an escape from demanding parents and feelings of loneliness (Rahiem, 2021). This study shows the misperception of adolescents thinking of marriage as an alternative plan for complex situations and parental lack of awareness toward child marriage's consequences, thus giving them consent.

3.3. The Impacts of Child Marriage
Child marriage has significant health impacts, including high maternal mortality and morbidity due to complications from pregnancy and childbirth. Teenage pregnancy is also linked to a higher risk of prematurity and underweight babies (Murewanhema, 2020). Child brides are often unable to effectively negotiate safer sex, making them more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and lack of contraception use, causing high fertility, short birth intervals, unintended pregnancy, and increased reproductive morbidity (Murewanhema, 2020; Fan & Koski, 2022). In developing countries, approximately 12 million girls aged 15-19 give birth yearly (WHO, 2022). Ironically, women who married as children were less likely to receive medical care during pregnancy and give birth in a healthcare facility than women who married as adults (Fan & Koski, 2022). This issue may be related to the difficult access to healthcare facilities as most child marriages happen in rural areas compared to urban areas.

Early marriage is associated with a high risk of physical and emotional violence, social isolation, and poor mental health. Many studies have shown evidence that early marriage had a higher risk of mood disorders, anxiety, depression, and other psychiatric disorders at later ages than those who married later (Fan & Koski, 2022). Child brides are often cut off from family and friends and have a limited support system. Meanwhile, they must be responsible for caring for the children and performing household chores despite being children themselves. Child marriage is ultimately a weakening of two generations, as poor mental health of a mother will be associated with an additional risk of developing behavioural and emotional problems in the children (Pires et al., 2020).

Poverty is both a determinant and a consequence of child marriage, with the study showing that women who were married before the age of 18 were more likely to live in poverty than women who were married above 18 years (13.8% vs 10.1%) (Wibowo et al., 2021). Most girls in low- and-middle-income countries who got married early would not be able to access further education and will dropped-out of school. Whereas better education is the key for them to grow, learn, and equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to get a better job opportunity and end the family’s poverty cycle.

3.4. Strategies to Prevent Child Marriage

After identifying the determinant factors causing child marriage during the pandemic, this section will provide some interventions to prevent child marriage based on the causal factors. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought a surge in global poverty, further exacerbated by rising inflation due to the conflict in Ukraine. The World Bank projected that this dual crisis would result in an additional 23.3-26.5 million people falling into poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mahler et al., 2022). Recognising that economic reason is one of the main factors contributing to child marriage, thus addressing household coping mechanisms towards income shocks and crisis is crucial. Households from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to allocate most of their
income towards food, making them more vulnerable to the current inflationary pressures than the higher-income groups. As many vulnerable families work in informal sectors, they often lack access to credit, insurance, and social protection during a crisis or emergency (Shukla et al., 2023). To mitigate the impact of these issues, the government can implement social protection policies that ensure safety and stability for families. By doing so, families will no longer consider child marriage as means of survival.

Additionally, interventions aimed at reducing parental stress during crises may help protect the well-being of children in vulnerable families. As noted by Indonesian adolescents, parents ironically put more pressure on them during the pandemic, leading them to consider marriage a way to escape. If parents can be resilient, they can provide financial and emotional support to their children during a crisis.

Schools play a critical role in preventing child marriage. Firstly, they can provide a supportive environment for children to get a better education, raise awareness of their rights towards their bodies and sexual integrity, and participate in positive extracurricular activities that nurture their interests and talents. Secondly, schools can serve as access points for students requiring psychosocial support. Teachers can intervene to support students experiencing sexual abuse or being forced into marriage and negotiate with their parents. Finally, schools can provide free meals or food to students from vulnerable families, easing the economic burden on their parents. In areas where girls face difficulties accessing formal schooling, community-based skills training institutions can help reduce the likelihood of girls being forced into marriage (Shukla et al., 2023).

It is crucial to raise awareness of the government and stakeholders regarding the increased vulnerability of children, particularly girls, during times of crisis. The government should strengthen the implementation of laws related to underage marriage, tighten the supervision of dispensation requests for underage marriage and unregistered religious marriages, enforcing the current legislation to carry fines or punishment to the violators. In addition to that, for young girls who are already in a marriage, the government can make sure the accessibility of sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning consultations to prevent complications from unintended early pregnancies and accessible support for the victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence against children and girls.

Child marriage is widely viewed as a human rights violence; hence several organisations have been working towards the Sustainable Development Goal of gender equity by ending child marriage by 2030. However, progress has been hindered in some countries, especially because of the disruptions of healthcare services and delayed programmes during the lockdown (UNICEF, 2022b). One of their efforts is to spread awareness of the harms of child marriage, especially among parents who are often primary instigators of such marriages. Addressing the deep rooting of sociocultural beliefs promoting early marriage must involve everyone in the community, for example, by involving religious leaders and community leaders to shift the
perception that marriage is a way to avoid non-marital pregnancy or promiscuity. As the rate of child marriage is higher in rural areas, awareness can be spread through community-based education and home visits by trained community health workers. Meanwhile, peer advocacy and social media campaigns can also be used to engage adolescents.

4. Conclusion
It is important to spread the awareness that child marriage not only robs a girl's childhood and chance to get an education but also threatens their health and well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic has been shown to increase the rate of child marriage due to several factors: economic difficulties, school closure, sociocultural beliefs, and lack of awareness towards the consequences of early marriage. Mitigating the long-term impact of the pandemic and the current cost-of-living crisis is substantial to protect girls from vulnerable families falling into forced marriage. Collaboration between government, stakeholders, schools, communities, and private sectors is necessary to prioritise and alleviate this issue.

References


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