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POLICY BRIEF:

BANGLADESH

DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM ANALYSIS
ON CHILD MARRIAGE
IN BANGLADESH



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INTRODUCTION

According to UNICEF, Bangladesh ranks fourth globally in terms of the number of child marriages.¹ Poverty, cultural and religious beliefs, and lack of education are a few reasons for child marriage in Bangladesh. Additionally, issues such as sexual harassment of unmarried girls and dowry for young girls make child marriage a regular occurrence in some communities.²

Bangladesh is also a disaster-prone country that frequently suffers flooding and other natural disasters. Floods, cyclones and river erosion exacerbate child marriage by pushing families into greater poverty.³ Finally, COVID-19 has elevated issues such as school closures, economic stress, service disruptions and parental death. As a result, an additional 10 million child marriages might take place in the country before the end of the decade.⁴

The Bangladesh Government has made efforts to eliminate child marriage through community awareness campaigns and by supporting girls' education. However, ongoing challenges to curbing the prevalence of child marriage include corruption by law enforcement officials, the complexity of legal procedures and improper implementation of laws at the grass-roots level. These obstacles hinder the Government's effort towards eliminating child marriage.⁵

Mobile Internet can potentially serve as a reliable tool to raise awareness and compel individuals and organizations to take action against child marriage. For instance, the Government of Bangladesh, in association with Plan International, developed a mobile application that prevents child marriage by allowing matchmakers, priests and officers who register marriages to verify the bride's and groom's ages through a digital database.⁶

People have taken to social media to rally around issues such as child marriage. Therefore, it becomes imperative to tap into the online space to understand perceptions existing within the community. This understanding can drive culturally informed initiatives by the Government, non-profit organizations and individuals. Quilt.AI, in partnership with the UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office, combines digital research and artificial intelligence to understand people's behaviours and attitudes towards child marriage in Bangladesh.



¹ <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/ending-child-marriage>

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/09/bangladesh-girls-damaged-child-marriage>

³ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-biosocial-science/article/abs/child-marriage-climate-vulnerability-and-natural-disasters-in-coastal-bangladesh/724DF784537EBC63B99E5A21B8676A10>

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/10-million-additional-girls-risk-child-marriage-due-covid-19-unicef>

⁵ <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620881/rr-bangladesh-child-early-forced-marriage-171019-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁶ <https://stories.plancanada.ca/3-innovative-apps-protecting-girls-around-the-world/>

METHODOLOGY

Search and social media data were analysed for this research to understand the discourse around child marriage existing on digital platforms. Search data was collected from the Google search engine and social media data was collected from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The search data was collected from April 2021 to March 2022, and the social media data was collected from January 2018 to April 2022.

For Bangladesh, 43 keywords and 160,400 unique searches were analysed. Keywords were determined by consulting the language used in local and English-medium media and reports by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The keyword list therefore included Bengali, Urdu and English words. This was followed by a brief literature review on the prevalence of child marriage in the country. The keyword list was later used as a search analysis tool to determine which keywords produce online volume. The final keyword list reflects how individuals are searching for these terms in Bangladesh, including local terms and phrases. Historical search data for each keyword was extracted for a month-to-month comparison of data.

The keywords were further clustered into four categories: information-seeking, law-related, religion-related and help-seeking, and an aggregate of the four. The categories are defined as:



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● INFORMATION-SEEKING:

general searches about child marriage or early marriage
(e.g. "child marriage in Bangladesh", "زواج الأطفال" [child marriage], "বাল্য বিবাহ আইন" [child marriage law])

● LAW-RELATED:

searches related to legal aspects of child marriage
(e.g. "child marriage law", "legal age to get married")

● RELIGION-RELATED:

searches specifically related to religion and child marriage
(e.g. minimum age for marriage in Islam")

● HELP-SEEKING:

searches about needing solutions to end child marriage or stopping the practice
(e.g. "report on child marriage", "what to do for early marriage", "Stop child marriage")

The social media discourse analysis included a qualitative read of 518 posts across Twitter, Facebook and YouTube that were also studied to better understand what people are discussing on child marriage across social media platforms.

Limitations

- For search, only past year data can be extracted. Further, it is not possible to collect user data for the search keywords.
- Social media data depends on what the research team is able to receive from each platform. It is not under the research team's control when social media platforms change their data-sharing policies with third-party organizations.

For example, at the end of July 2021, Facebook no longer gave access to its audience insights information. This leads to limited analysis for this study on age and geography disaggregated data.

- Discourse across countries differs depending on the volume of data available.

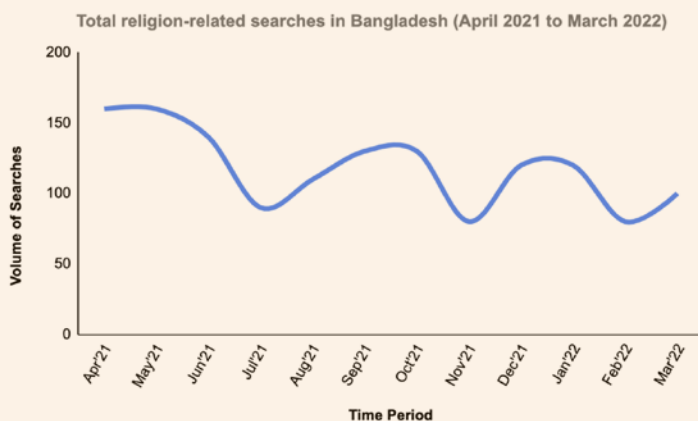
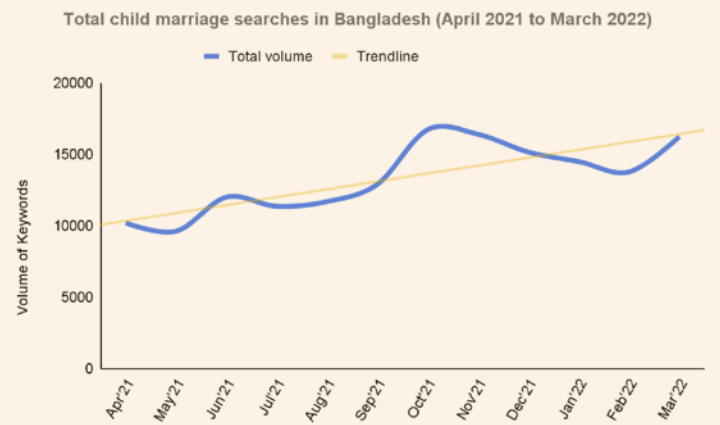


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FINDINGS: SEARCH ANALYSIS

There was a steady growth in total volume of child marriage-related searches for Bangladesh. The volume of searches increased by 59 per cent between April 2021 and March 2022. Mild spikes were observed in the total volume of searches for the months of June 2021 and October 2021. A closer look at the spikes suggests an increase in the information-seeking category of searches during these months. In particular, the keywords “বাল্য বিবাহ” (child marriage) observed a spike in volume during this period.

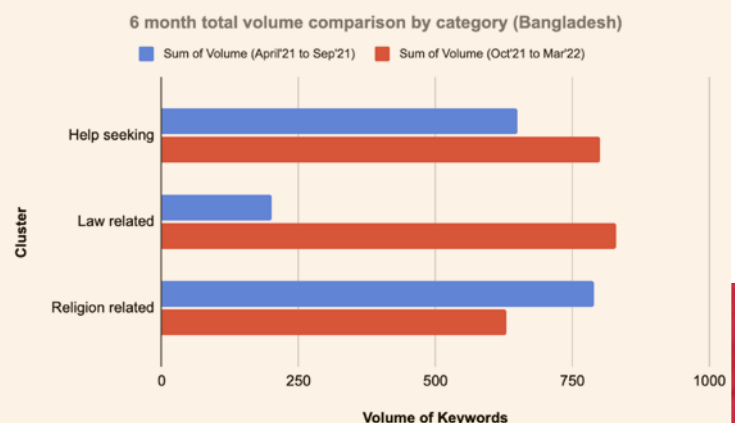
A closer look at the data indicates that there was a steady decrease in the searches related to religion and child marriage between April 2021 and March 2022.



Searches related to religion and child marriage in Bangladesh decreased by 38 per cent between April 2021 and March 2022.

A six-month volume comparison suggests that child marriage and law-related searches grew by 315 per cent between April 2021 and September 2021 and between October 2021 and March 2022.

Child marriage and religion-related searches decreased by 20 per cent during the same period, indicating a reduced interest and discussion around this topic in the online landscape.



FINDINGS: SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

For the social media discourse around child marriage, 281 unique tweets, 368 comments under the 17 most viewed YouTube videos and 220 posts from the 11 most liked Facebook pages (with comments) were studied.

Common Words and Phrases



Twitter is majorly used to spread awareness

Out of 281 unique tweets, 45 per cent were sharing and resharing the reports, events and webinars that were happening around child marriage in Bangladesh.⁷ Eight per cent of the tweets called out the laws in specific religions that support child marriage. The comments sections of tweets falling under this category hosted debates between the supporters and opposers of the law imposed by the religion.

Apart from this, NGOs and partnering organizations communicated about new schemes aimed at preventing child marriage by providing financial assistance in rural and peri-urban parts of Bangladesh.⁸ The analysis also found that Twitter posts focused on the reported cases of child marriages from Bangladesh and urged the public to abstain from the harmful practice of child marriage.

Seven per cent of the posts talked about the biological implications of child marriage for young girls, to spread awareness of the issue.

While the majority of the discourse was observed to be around preventing child marriage through videos, awareness campaigns, influencers and events, the comments sections of a few of the posts were digressing from the topic using the technique of whataboutism.⁹ (For example, “What about children having sex before marriage”)

Facebook is used to provide a platform for mobilization

Facebook was dominated by pages and posts providing last-mile support to the survivors and bystanders through Facebook groups and communities. Of the 46 identified pages, 28 per cent were stakeholders or non-profit organizations working to prevent child marriage, while 17 per cent were personal blog pages. Around 24 per cent of the pages were community pages hosting awareness sessions and forums against child marriage in Bangladesh.

For this study, 220 posts were analysed from 11 Facebook pages with more than 500 likes. Most of the discourse was on spreading awareness about the law banning child marriages and providing last-mile support to survivors and bystanders of child marriage in Bangladesh. Usage of anecdotal evidence, interviews, street plays and documentaries to spread awareness around this harmful practice were some of the recurring techniques observed on the Facebook pages.



⁷ Example: <https://twitter.com/MariamSumaia/status/1314409450027925504>

⁸ Example: <https://twitter.com/cbasia/status/1514058464363958282>

⁹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/whataboutism-origin-meaning>

Two public Facebook pages out of the 46 identified were observed promoting child marriage in Bangladesh. One of the pages had more than 2,200 followers. The discourse on these two Facebook pages was studied in depth to understand the narratives promoted by these pages.

Narratives promoted on pro-child marriage pages:

- **Justifying child marriages under the name of religion:**

Many of the posts on these pages argue that child marriage is a part of the religious law followed by the majority in Bangladesh and hence demand legalization of child marriage in Bangladesh.

- **Celebrating child marriage day:**

The pages celebrate 15 July as child marriage day to display support for the harmful practice in Bangladesh.

- **Sharing global examples:**

The pages share examples of other governments that allow marriage below the age of 18 to argue for the legalization of child marriage in Bangladesh.

- **Challenging science over tradition:**

A few posts provide examples of practices that were previously banned due to scientific evidence but were overturned with time through more research. For example, one of the posts quotes: "Previously it was said that heart, cholesterol is high, a stroke patient is not right to eat eggs. Especially can't eat egg yolk! But now they are saying there is no harm in eating at least one egg every day" (translated from Bangla to English). Such examples are used to argue against banning child marriage in Bangladesh.

Apart from this, the comments sections on these Facebook pages are dominated by supporters of child marriage. For example, one of the comments said: "child marriage is more important than oxygen at present. Thank you to all involved for starting such a group to protect the character of Muslims and Iman. Insha Allah, Allah will give you the highest reward in this world and the hereafter. Donate and spread child marriage all over the Muslim world Amin Wama Tawfiqi Allah" (translated from Bangla to English).



YouTube is utilized to condemn the practice of child marriage

Seventeen videos with more than 500 views were analysed out of 100 geotagged videos from 94 YouTube channels in Bangladesh. All the analysed videos were focused on preventing and denouncing child marriages in Bangladesh. The genre of the videos differed between educational plays, animated videos, anecdotal interviews and public reporting. The video with the highest viewership displayed a documentary on implementing the law against child marriage in Bangladesh.

The comments sections of these YouTube videos have comments supporting the law and criticizing the practice of child marriage in Bangladesh. However, a few comments also questioned the law under the pretext of religious practices and laws.



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⁹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/whataboutism-origin-meaning>

RECOMMENDATIONS

The identified discourse and narratives on different social media platforms could be addressed and leveraged through context-specific strategies. A few of such strategies are:

● ● ● Search results for help-seeking terms such as “বাল্য বিবাহ সমর্থন সাহায্য” and “child marriage helpline Bangladesh” led to Wikipedia pages, news articles covering child helpline numbers and reports published by international organizations around child marriage.¹⁰ No government or trusted organization web portal offering last-mile support was visible in the search results. This issue could be addressed by building a digital portal for last-mile support and promoting the portal on Google and Facebook marketplaces.

● ● ● One of the opposition’s major narratives on social media is justifying child marriage under the pretext of religion. To address this narrative, civil society organizations (CSOs) and governments could involve religious leaders in spreading awareness about the religious laws and tackling the misconceptions about the laws.

● ● ● Facebook and YouTube were predominantly being used by local CSOs, communities and individuals to spread awareness around child marriage. International organizations could partner with such local CSOs and communities to create contextual content and scale the impact of the awareness campaigns in the local Bangla-speaking communities.

● ● ● Around 27 per cent of the Facebook pages in the analysis displayed a contact number for last-mile support around child marriage issues. There is scope to increase this percentage in the digital landscape. International organizations and governments could provide capacity-building support to Facebook communities to develop a last-mile support system.

● ● ● The research identified certain behaviours and belief patterns that might lead to child marriage, such as religious beliefs and traditional gender roles. Such behaviour and belief patterns could be addressed through targeted online and offline behaviour-change campaigns focused on the demographically identified population.

¹⁰ Child marriage here refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child (as defined by UNICEF).



CONCLUSION

The Government and CSOs have achieved some successes in reducing the harmful practice of child marriage in Bangladesh. However, this practice is still far from being completely eradicated from the country. Search engine data suggests a growing interest in the topic of child marriage. Governments and CSOs should leverage this increasing trend to scale their awareness and advocacy strategies around preventing the practice.

The discussion around child marriage is on all the analysed social media platforms. Facebook is one of the most used platforms to mobilize offline communities around this harmful practice, followed by Twitter. Debates and discussions around the child marriage law take place in the comments sections of all social media platforms. There is a small but visible discourse supporting the harmful practice of child marriage on social media platforms. Governments and CSOs can leverage the social media platforms to understand the motivations and patterns behind such support and modify their communications strategies to address the practice in the future.

With increasing Internet and social media penetration, the reach and impact of awareness and advocacy campaigns are also growing. The Government, international organizations and CSOs should identify the patterns of digital behaviours and leverage online platforms to scale up their campaigns and strategies to prevent the harmful practice of child marriage.

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