

# **Can the Law Affect Attitudes and Behaviour in the Absence of Strict Enforcement? Experimental Evidence from a Child Marriage Reform in Bangladesh**

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# Motivation: Early Marriage

- Early marriage is ubiquitous in developing countries,
  - one in four women marry before the age of 18, typically in their adolescence (UNFPA 2020)
- Adverse effects of early female marriage on, e.g.
  - infant mortality (Garcia-Hombrados 2021)
  - education (Field and Ambrus 2008)
  - investment in the human capital of the next generation (Sekhri and Debnath 2014; Chari, Heath, Maertens and Fatima 2017; Sunder 2019)
  - social networks and attitudes towards gender norms (Asadullah and Wahhaj 2019)

# Motivation:

## Policies for Eradicating Child Marriage

- To reduce the practice of early marriage, govts, development agencies and NGOs have attempted a variety of interventions including:
  - incentives and skill training for adolescent girls, community awareness programs, conditional cash transfers
- Moreover, some countries have introduced harsher penalties for early marriage and/or raised minimum marriage age
  - most recently, bill in Indian parliament to raise legal age from 18 to 21 for women

# Motivation: Laws vs Social Norms

- Most countries have laws stipulating a minimum marriage age
  - although exceptions are often allowed, typically in case of parental or court consent (UNFPA 2012, Pew Research Center 2016)
- Given weak law enforcement in developing countries, effectiveness of legal changes unclear
- Added challenge: practice often governed by social norms regarding marriage
  - e.g. in South Asia (and other parts of the world with patriarchal norms), strong social pressures to marry from the onset of puberty (Ortner 1978, Dube 1997).

# Motivation: Law Matters in Theory

- “law influences behavior independent of the sanctions it threatens to impose, that law works by what it says in addition to what it does.” (McAdams, 2000b)
  - The law may have an expressive effect - “sending a message about society’s values” (Sunstein 1996; McAdams 2000; Benabou & Tirole, 2012)

# Research Question

- Can the law influence social attitudes and behaviour – in a setting in which enforcement is absent or weak?
  - What's the effect of CMRA 2017 on child marriage related social attitudes and behaviour?

# What Do We Do?

- We administer a video-based information intervention conducted in June 2018
- The video consisted of a short fictional drama involving the early marriage of an adolescent girl
- Aimed at accelerating knowledge transmission in rural areas about the new law
  - The new child marriage law
    - approved in the national parliament in March 2017 (but implementation rules announced late 2018)

# Outline – Rest of the Presentation

- Country Context
- Methodology
  - Measurements
  - Estimation
- Main Results
  - Short-term impact
  - Longer-term impact
- Discussion & Interpretation
- Conclusion



## Country Context: Legals Reforms to Tackle Early Marriage

- Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929
  - minimum marriage age set at 18 for women, 21 for men
  - marrying a child/facilitating child marriage punishable by 1 month imprisonment or fine of 1000 Taka (12.50 USD)
- Replaced by Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017
  - both **progressive** and **regressive** elements
  - Special exemption clause
    - *“Notwithstanding anything contained in any other provision of this Act, if a marriage is solemnized in such manner and under such special circumstances as may be prescribed by rules in the best interests of the minor, at the directions of the court and with consent of the parents or the guardian of the minor, as the case maybe, it shall not be deemed to be an offence under this Act”*

# Methodology: Sample and Data

- Bangladesh WiLCAS 2014
  - representative sample of 6,293 women born 1975 - 1994
    - background, attitudes, awareness
- CiMLAS 2018
  - 80 village clusters selected at random from original 391
  - WiLCAS village clusters
    - All female respondents in these village clusters (N=971) and additional respondents in the family (N=786)

# Methodology: Intervention

- The Video intervention:
  - we showed a short video drama involving the marriage of a 15 year old girl to all respondents, individually
  - the video shown to the treatment and control groups are almost identical except that
    - C group video only makes reference to 1929 CMRA (i.e. lighter punishment)
    - T 1 video makes reference to 2017 CMRA's greater punishment but not the exception clause
    - T 2 video makes reference to 2017 CMRA's greater punishment as well as the exception clause
- Randomised across households in 2 independent dimensions
  - the video content
  - whether or not the relevant video was shown to family elders in addition to mothers of adolescent girls.

**Figure: Showing Video during CiMLAS fieldwork**



**Figure: Shots from Drama on Video shown to Participants**



## Methodology: Measuring Beliefs, Attitudes & Practices (1)

- *Direct* questions on attitudes towards marriage practices
  - about appropriate marriage age, should the bride and groom have say in the marriage decision
  - beliefs about attitudes of others within the community
- *Indirect* measures of attitudes via:
  - 2 vignettes
    - hypothetical cases of child marriage involving a dilemma respondents asked about *delayed marriage choices* they would make & their beliefs about how others in their community would respond

## Methodology: Measuring Beliefs, Attitudes & Practices (2)

- Actual child marriage events after the intervention
  - information collected via two follow-up *telephone* interviews conducted 5 & 10 months after information intervention
  - record new marriages - and any steps taken towards marriage - among respondents' adolescent daughters
    - e.g. marriages since June 2018, offers of marriage received, responses given, etc.

Pre-analysis plan: <https://www.socialsciregistry.org/trials/3035>



## Methodology: Estimating Impact on Short-term outcomes (Marriage-Related Beliefs and Attitudes)

$$y_{ihv} = \alpha + \beta_1 T_{1hv} + \beta_2 T_{2hv} + d_v + X_{ihv} + \varepsilon_{ihv} \quad (1)$$

- $y_{ihv}$  is the outcome variable for respondent  $i$  in household  $h$  in village  $v$
- $T_{khv}$  is a dummy indicating whether household  $h$  in village  $v$  received treatment  $k$
- $d_v$  is a village-level dummy;
- $X_{ihv}$  is a vector of individual-level controls.

## Methodology: Estimating Impact on Longer-term outcomes (actual marriages & steps towards marriage) after 5 months and 10 months)

$$y_{jihv} = \alpha + \beta_1 T_{1hv} + \beta_2 T_{2hv} + X_{jihv} + Z_{ihv} + \varepsilon_{jihv} \quad (2)$$

- where  $y_{jihv}$  is the outcome variable for daughter  $j$  of respondent  $i$  in household  $h$  in village  $v$ ;
- $T_{khv}$  is the treatment status of household  $h$  in village  $v$  under treatment  $k$ ;
- $X_{jihv}$  represents the characteristics of daughter  $j$  and  $Z_{ihv}$  the characteristics of respondent  $i$ .



## Baseline Comparison: Control vs T1 and T2

	control (C)	treatment 1 (T1)	p-val of diff (C - T1)	treatment 2 (T2)	p-val of diff (C - T2)
Age	41.36	40.71	(0.36)	40.82	(0.46)
Male	0.29	0.28	(0.72)	0.26	(0.27)
Schooling	4.12	4.01	(0.68)	3.90	(0.36)
Married	0.90	0.91	(0.72)	0.91	(0.57)
Married before 18	0.52	0.48	(0.23)	0.52	(1.00)
Employed	0.35	0.35	(0.99)	0.34	(0.70)
2014 Norms Index 2	0.01	-0.01	(0.74)	0.01	(0.97)
Father Schooling	2.68	2.62	(0.80)	2.70	(0.94)
Mother Schooling	1.24	1.25	(0.95)	1.12	(0.39)
Mother works	0.09	0.07	(0.23)	0.07	(0.17)
Father low pay	0.23	0.24	(0.48)	0.23	(0.80)
Half Acre Land	0.46	0.49	(0.24)	0.46	(0.93)
Adol. girl 13-17	0.26	0.30	(0.30)	0.29	(0.52)
Knows min age	0.85	0.87	(0.21)	0.86	(0.67)
Knows punishment	0.79	0.81	(0.43)	0.79	(0.88)
Knows age exception	0.09	0.07	(0.23)	0.09	(0.63)
Learnt law after 2014	0.18	0.20	(0.43)	0.20	(0.25)
Knows CM court case	0.38	0.34	(0.17)	0.36	(0.48)
Observations	613	556	1169	588	1201

Source: 2018 CiMLAS and authors' calculations.

## Results : Short-Term Outcomes for Full Sample (Part A)

	Attitudes towards early marriage		Would support daughters' decision	
	appropriate marriage age	marriage before 18 appropriate	Vignette A	Vignette B
treatment 1	0.034 (0.102)	-0.007 (0.011)	0.013 (0.017)	-0.035 (0.029)
treatment 2	-0.194** (0.099)	0.009 (0.012)	-0.001 (0.017)	-0.060** (0.029)
Observations	1757	1757	1757	1757
dep var mean	18.741	0.039	0.912	0.620
dep var sd	1.643	0.194	0.284	0.486
T1 FWER p-val	0.811	0.811	0.811	0.622
T2 FWER p-val	0.149	0.761	0.947	0.149
$\beta_1 = \beta_2$	0.024	0.177	0.386	0.413

Note: This table presents the results of OLS regressions of short term outcome variables against treatment status indicators, including individual-level controls and village fixed effects (not shown). The sample consists of all respondents (both primary and additional respondents) in the 2018 CiMLAS survey. Standard errors are given in parentheses. The penultimate rows display Westfall-Young stepdown adjusted p-values for the coefficients on T1 and T2. These control the family-wise error rate for all tests in a given family of hypotheses (further information is provided in Section 4). The last row reports the p-value from a Wald test for a difference in coefficients between T1 and T2 (i corresponds to the coefficient of the term in the *i*th row). \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Source: 2018 CiMLAS.

## Results : Short-Term Outcomes for Full Sample (Part B)

	Beliefs re. attitudes in community/village		Would others support daughters' decision		Would others approve parents' decision	
	appropriate marriage age	people think worse marriage a/f 18	Vignette A	Vignette B	Vignette A	Vignette B
treatment 1	0.024 (0.117)	-0.009 (0.029)	-0.025 (0.028)	-0.012 (0.027)	-0.061** (0.030)	-0.013 (0.028)
treatment 2	0.128 (0.109)	-0.061** (0.028)	-0.013 (0.027)	0.002 (0.027)	-0.010 (0.029)	-0.007 (0.027)
Observations	1757	1757	1757	1757	1757	1757
dep var mean	17.300	0.494	0.680	0.315	0.522	0.299
dep var sd	1.911	0.500	0.467	0.465	0.500	0.458
T1 FWER p-val	0.963	0.963	0.819	0.963	0.089	0.652
T2 FWER p-val	0.530	0.113	0.849	0.948	0.926	0.926
$\beta_1 = \beta_2$	0.375	0.070	0.656	0.614	0.086	0.817

Note: This table presents the results of OLS regressions of short term outcome variables against treatment status indicators, including individual-level controls and village fixed effects (not shown). The sample consists of all respondents (both primary and additional respondents) in the 2018 CiMLAS survey. Standard errors are given in parentheses. The penultimate rows display Westfall-Young stepdown adjusted p-values for the coefficients on T1 and T2. These control the family-wise error rate for all tests in a given family of hypotheses (further information is provided in Section 4). The last row reports the p-value from a Wald test for a difference in coefficients between T1 and T2 (i corresponds to the coefficient of the term in the *i*th row). \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . Source: 2018 CiMLAS.

## Results : Longer-Term (Marriage-Related) Outcomes of Adolescent Daughters

	5 Months			10 Months		
	married	accepted offer	any marriage steps	married	accepted offer	any marriage steps
treatment 1	0.072** (0.031)	0.203*** (0.074)	0.086* (0.044)	0.073* (0.042)	0.162** (0.074)	0.112** (0.054)
treatment 2	0.024 (0.026)	0.112 (0.073)	0.048 (0.043)	0.039 (0.042)	0.038 (0.067)	0.045 (0.050)
Observations	261	112	261	234	139	234
dep var mean	0.012	0.032	0.060	0.053	0.100	0.092
dep var sd	0.110	0.180	0.239	0.225	0.304	0.291
T1 FWER p-val	0.043	0.027	0.045	0.092	0.073	0.076
T2 FWER p-val	0.429	0.273	0.429	0.572	0.574	0.572
$\beta_1 = \beta_2$	0.203	0.311	0.451	0.508	0.136	0.259

Note: This table presents the results of OLS regressions of marriage-related outcomes against treatment status indicators for a sample of female children aged 13 to 17 at the time of the initial CiMLAS survey. These outcomes were collected from phone surveys conducted 5 and 10 months after the initial CiMLAS survey. A variety of controls were included (but are not shown): age of child, age at child at menarche, whether the primary respondent (PR) / child's mother was married before age 18, PR's primary education completion status, PR's knowledge of the correct legal marriage age, PR's knowledge of the correct punishments for infractions of the child marriage law, PR's awareness of the exception clause, PR's learning of the law after 2014, and PR's knowledge of a child marriage legal case. Standard errors are given in parentheses. The penultimate rows report Westfall-Young stepdown adjusted p-values which control the family-wise error rate (FWER) for each tested hypothesis in the table. The last row reports the p-value from a Wald test for a difference in coefficients between T1 and T2 (i corresponds to the coefficient of the term in the ith row). \*p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.01. Source: 2018 CiMLAS.

# Additional Analysis

- Additional heterogeneous effect
  - If the information intervention is limited to the mother only, treatment effect is insignificant
  - Significant perverse effect of T1 on attitudes (short-term) for the subsample with unmarried adolescent girls (in baseline).
  - “Perverse effect” specific to male respondent
  - The perverse effects ...in households in which the previous generation had experienced early marriage.
- Robustness
  - Marriage (Cox Proportional) Hazard model estimates of outcomes confirm the longer-term effects

## Other Possibilities

- Untruthful Reporting by Survey Respondents ?
  - Experimenter demand effects
  - Social desirability bias

# Discussion & Conclusion

- Evidence of a 'backlash' effect against CMRA 2017
  - Households exposed to harsher punishment provisions in CMRA 2017 more likely to experience early marriage.
- Perverse effect absent where only the mother of the adolescent girl is treated.
- Echo two recent studies on the effects of laws relating to the minimum age of marriage.
  - Bellés-Obrero and Lombardi (2020) - Mexico
  - Roy and Tam (2021) - British colonial India
- Policy implication - unintended consequences of a legal solution to child marriage