

Leave the Knot Untied: Education and Child Marriage in Bangladesh and Bolivia

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Abstract

This article looks at education and child marriage in Bangladesh and Bolivia. More specifically, it examines how education can prevent girls from marrying when they are still children. While Bangladesh and Bolivia are both developing countries, they are very different in terms of income per capita, culture and the prevalence of child marriage. Therefore, this article will analyze the roots of these differences as well as some similar explanations for child marriage in Bangladesh and Bolivia. It will also look at what policies and initiatives have been successful to reduce child marriage in Bolivia and Bangladesh.

I. Introduction

Child marriage and lack of education are mutually detrimental. When girls marry before they turn 18-years-old, they are more likely to drop out of school, which then limits their career potential as well as their self-empowerment to make decisions and have a voice within family and society. Similarly, when girls do not go to school or drop out early, they are more prone to child marriage because they no longer have an escape from societal expectations to become a wife and mother. Schurmann (2009, p. 505) writes: “As an intervention, increasing access to secondary educations has great potential to counter social exclusion for girls whose traditional gender responsibilities have kept them from full economic and social participation.”

Both Bolivia and Bangladesh have made considerable progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of promoting gender equality and empowering women. However, the fact that the majority of girls in Bangladesh and just under a fifth of girls in Bolivia are married as children shows that the goal has not been achieved completely. Thus, it is important to look at the factors that are driving child marriage—such as poverty, access to education, and cultural expectations—to uncover the differences between the degree of child marriage in the two countries.

To best examine the interrelationship between child marriage and education in Bolivia and Bangladesh, this article will first lay out the core differences between the countries in relation to

GDP per capita, life expectancy at birth, and the percentages of people living below \$1.90-a-day and \$3.10-a-day. Beyond that primary background, this article mainly aims to compare access to education, cultural implications, and the level of poverty, ultimately arguing that those factors influence child marriage and social progress for girls in both Bolivia and Bangladesh.

II. Brief Literature Review

While it has become widely recognized that empowering young girls through education can decrease birth rates, as well as the chances of maturing too fast through child marriage, the topic spans a wide variety of articles. Schurmann (2009) and Bates, Maselko and Schuler (2007) analyze the educational programs targeting girls in Bangladesh, while Reid and Miller (2012) take a similarly analytical approach in researching gender equity in Bolivian school systems. Zapata, Contreras and Kruger (2011) focus on examining Bolivia's school systems when it comes to the work-school decision. Though focusing neither on Bangladesh nor Bolivia, UNICEF (2005) details the state of the world's children, using many examples from Bangladesh and Bolivia.

- Schurmann (2009) reviews the Female Secondary School Stipend Project in Bangladesh, a program to increase the enrollment of girls in secondary schools. Schurmann digs deeper to explain how this project could delay marriage and childbearing. She also looks at the factors that contribute to the exclusion of girls from secondary schooling in Bangladesh, such as: harassment, poverty, and premature marriage and childbirth. Thus, she offers a perspective on the current and future progressive education policies affecting girls in Bangladesh, focusing on an analysis of the Female Secondary School Stipend Project.
- Reid and Miller (2012) examine the Bolivian education system, especially in relation to recent national educational reform law that mandated gender equity. They describe Bolivian culture as a basis to the institutional and structural limitations upon Bolivian girls in school and in other aspects of their lives. Through in-depth interviews and observation, the article examines the effectiveness of reforming gender equity in Bolivian schools. Reid and Miller offer information about progressive leanings in Bolivian education through a more sociological lens.
- Zapata, Contreras and Kruger (2011) analyze the effect of the work-school choice in Bolivia, in which children and their families are forced to choose between going to school or working to support their families' incomes. The article concludes that girls, especially indigenous girls, are most vulnerable to being excluded. The authors also recognize the greater impact of not educating girls, noting that education can empower girls and lower birth rates. The article emphasizes how cultural distinctions influence the degree to which girls are educated in Bolivia.
- Bates, Maselko and Schuler (2007) focuses on women in Bangladesh and tests the hypothesis that daughters of women with more education marry later and that daughters-in-law of more educated women initiate childbearing at a slower rate. They support this hypothesis by explaining that the traditional setting of many communities in rural Bangladesh requires that parents decide the age of marriage, with influence from mothers-in-law. Their study analyzes data from a 2002 survey in six villages in rural Bangladesh.
- UNICEF (2005) provides an extensive report on the state of the world's children, illustrating the difference between children being excluded and children being invisible.

Exclusion refers to issues such as not receiving an education, health services and food, while invisibility refers to children disappearing due to premature entry into adult roles, such as marriage. While being excluded and being invisible are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they are conceptually different problems and hence, policy interventions to address exclusion and invisibility have a different focus.

III. Empirical Background

Despite being a resource-rich country—gas makes up 50 percent of exports—Bolivia is still considered one of the least-developed countries in the world due to “state-oriented policies that deter investment and growth,” according to the World Factbook.¹ In 1982, Bolivia established democratic civilian rule, facing issues such as poverty, social unrest, illegal drug production, as well as a disastrous economic crisis. Into the 1990s, economic reforms brought about increased private investment, economic growth, and reduced poverty rates. However, the few years before the current socialist president Evo Morales was elected (on December 18, 2005) were marked by instability in all senses: politics, race, and violence. When the global recession hit in 2009, Bolivia maintained the highest growth rate in South America and has averaged 5.3 percent growth each year after that, especially growing rapidly in between 2010 and 2013 when commodity prices were high. However, the subsequent decline in oil prices caused Bolivian growth rates and revenue to decline. One of the biggest challenges facing Bolivia and its economy, on top of continuing social unrest, is a lack of foreign investment.²

Similar to Bolivia’s large share of gas exports, more than 80 percent of Bangladesh’s exports are ready-made garments (RMG). The RMG sector continues to grow despite fatal factory accidents, strikes, and political unrest. After becoming independent in 1971, the country faced series of military coups, and a constant struggle for power between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL). The country returned to democratic rule in 2008, when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was elected. The period that followed buckled under the global recession, poor infrastructure, corruption, insufficient power supplies, and slow implementation of economic reforms. Today, more than half of the GDP of Bangladesh comes from the services sector, but most Bangladeshis still work in agriculture, specifically on rice fields. The economy continues to grow at an average of 6 percent each year due to the RMG industry and remittances from Bangladeshis who work overseas.³

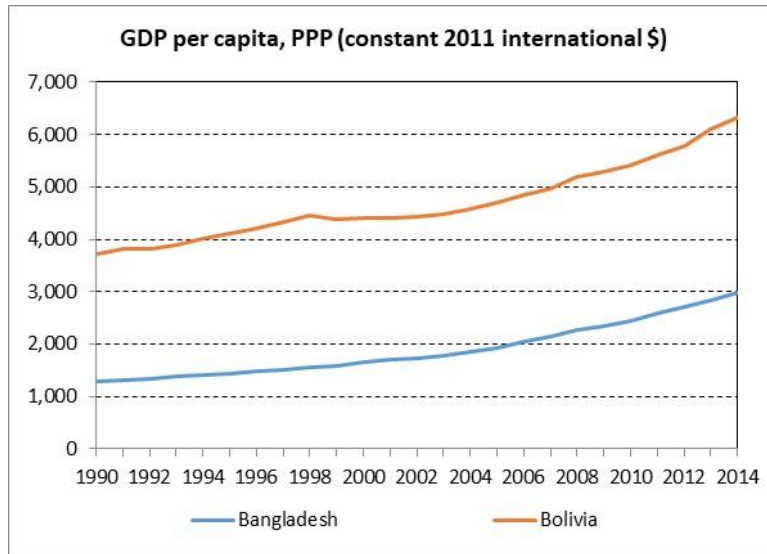
The influence of Bolivia’s rich resources and economic reform in the 1990s can be seen in Figure 1. The figure also shows the considerable difference in the level of GDP per capita between Bangladesh and Bolivia. In 1990, Bangladesh had a GDP per capita (based on purchasing power parity (PPP)) of \$1,290, while that of Bolivia was with \$3,707 about three times that of Bangladesh. In 2014, Bangladesh’s GDP per capita had reached \$2,979, while that of Bolivia reached \$ 6,325, which is only slightly more than twice that of Bangladesh. In other words, while the nominal gap between Bangladesh and Bolivia has increased, in relative terms, Bangladesh’s GDP per capita grew faster during the last 25 years than that of Bolivia.

¹ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (undated), The World Factbook, Bolivia; Section on Economy.

² Most of this paragraph is based on information provided by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s World Factbook for Bolivia.

³ This paragraph is based mostly on information provided by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s World Factbook for Bangladesh.

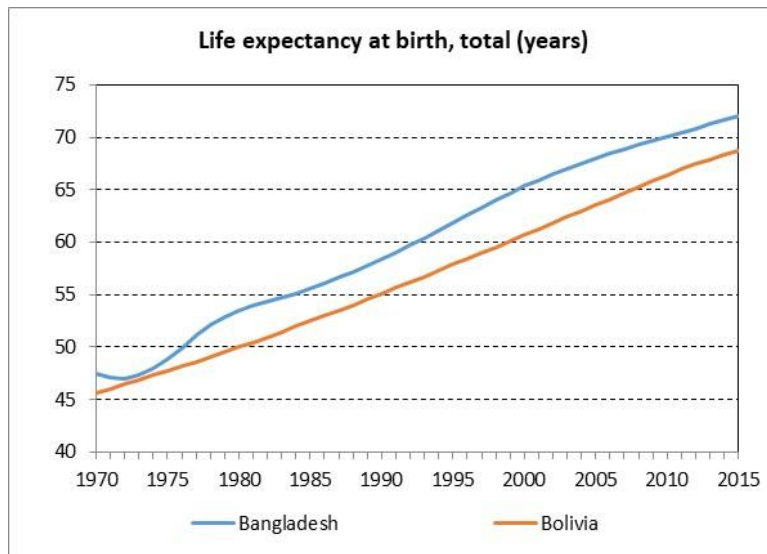
Figure 1: GDP per capita (constant 2011 international \$), 1990-2014



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2016).

While Bolivia is much richer than Bangladesh, Bangladesh has a higher life expectancy than Bolivia, though the gap between the two countries is relatively small. As Figure 2 shows, both countries have made considerable progress over the last 45 years. Bangladesh has increased its life expectancy by 24.5 years, while Bolivia's life expectancy has increased by 23.1 years.

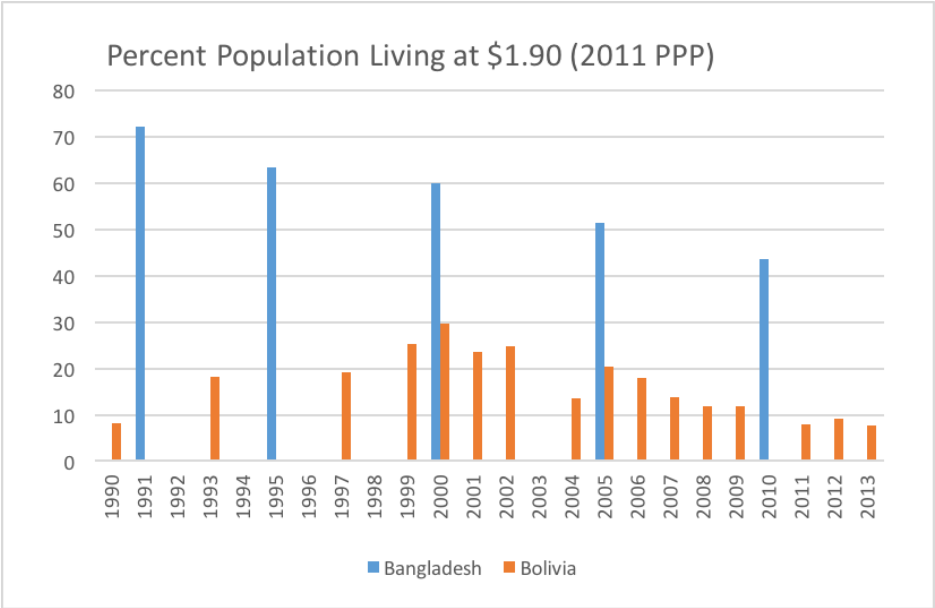
Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth (Years)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2016).

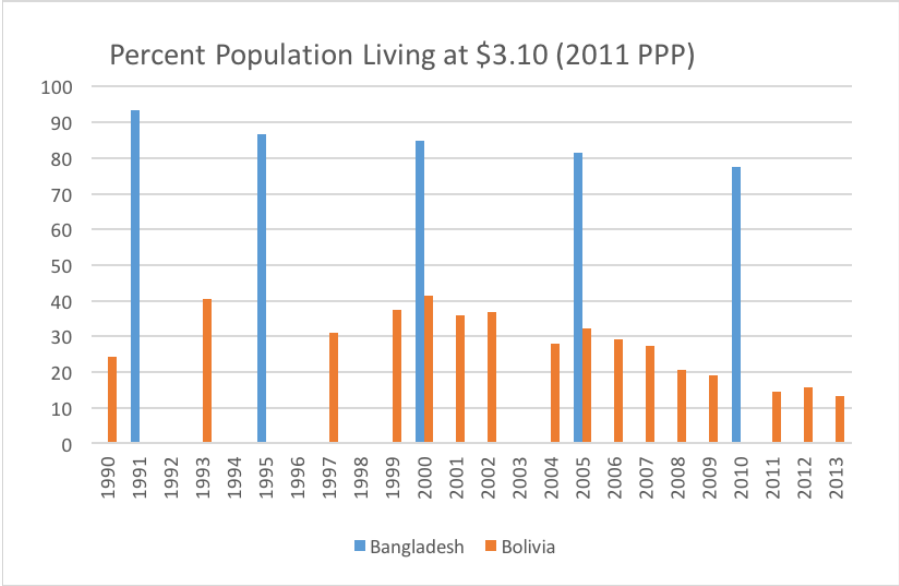
Consistent with Bangladesh’s much lower GDP per capita, Figures 3 and 4 show that poverty, measured at the international poverty lines of \$1.90-a-day and \$3.10-a-day, is far more common in Bangladesh than in Bolivia. Figures 3 and 4 also show that Bangladesh has made considerable progress with reducing poverty, while the level of poverty in Bolivia has been volatile during 1990 to 2013. The figures show how Bolivia’s poverty overall increased in the early 2000s before decreasing again in 2006, which coincides with a period marked by instability and violence.

Figure 3: Percent of Population below \$1.90 a day (2011 PPP)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2016).

Figure 4: Percent of Population living below \$3.10 a day (2011 PPP)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2016).

IV. Discussion

The level of poverty can be an indication that children prematurely enter into adult roles, such as child marriage. According to UNICEF (2005), poverty and inequality frequently cause children to be excluded and become invisible. Invisibility refers to children not getting the attention they need because they have taken on adult roles. For examples, many girls are married and have children, hence, they are considered to be mothers, no longer children themselves.

Although influencing factors, poverty and inequality cannot justify or explain child marriage. Instead, one must focus on each country and examine the ways that the country's policies and culture has perpetuated child marriage. We will also review how both countries have made considerable progress in gender equality. To accomplish this, the discussion section will compare education's role in delaying marriage; the influence of cultures related to female empowerment like purdah and marianismo; and the direct implications of poverty in delaying marriages, often due to a lack of investment in education.

Each step of the discussion will show the interconnectedness of education and child marriage, tied by the strings of government shortcomings, access to educational and non-national resources, cultural ideologies, and financial burdens. The first subsection provides some information on legal age for marriage, the evolution of adolescent fertility, and teenage pregnancies. The second subsection focuses on child marriage and education. The third subsection focuses on cultural factors and female empowerment, while the fourth subsection examines the influence of poverty on education and child marriage.

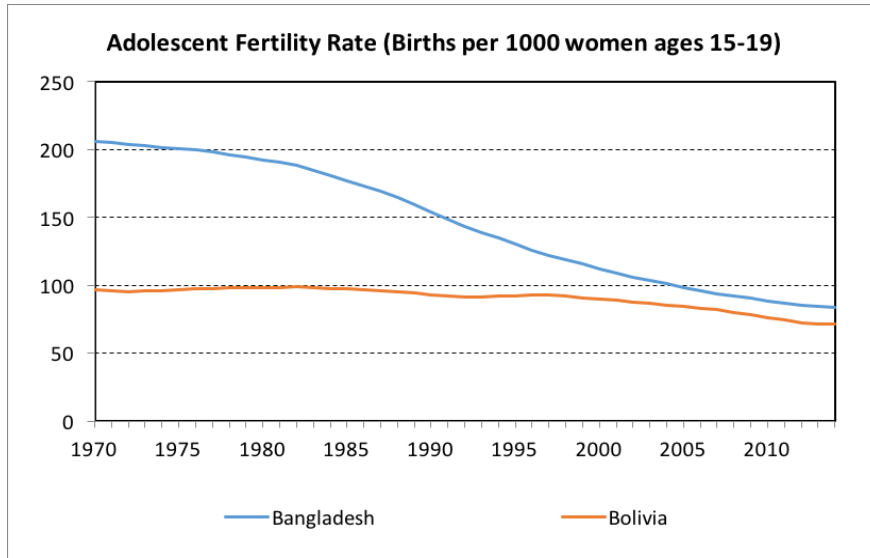
IV.1. Legal Age for Marriage and Adolescent Fertility

Although marriage is illegal until a girl turns 18 years-old in Bangladesh, inconsistent birth registration and a lack of enforcement contribute to a culture in which over half of Bangladeshi women are married before they reach age 18. As shown in Table 9 of UNICEF (2014, p. 84), between 2005 and 2013, 29 percent of Bangladeshi girls were married by age 15, and 65 percent were married before age 18.

In the case of Bolivia, three percent of Bolivia's girls were married by age 15 between 2005 and 2013, and 22 percent were married before they were 18 years old. In Bolivia, the legal age to get married is 21 years of age. However, most men are allowed to get married at 16 years and woman as early as 14 years, if they have parental consent.

Figure 5 shows the adolescent fertility rates (defined as births per 1,000 women ages 15-19) for Bangladesh and Bolivia from 1970-2014. It shows that Bangladesh had a much higher adolescent fertility rate than Bolivia in the 1070s, but it decreased rapidly since the early 1980s, and nearly reached Bolivia's adolescent fertility rates by 2014. In Bolivia, there has been no progress with reducing adolescent fertility from 1970 to 1998. Only from 1998 onwards has Bolivia been able to moderately reduce its adolescent fertility rate. As of 2014, the adolescent fertility rate was 83.5 births per 1,000 women ages 15-19 in Bangladesh, while it was 71.1 births per 1,000 women ages 15-19 in Bolivia.

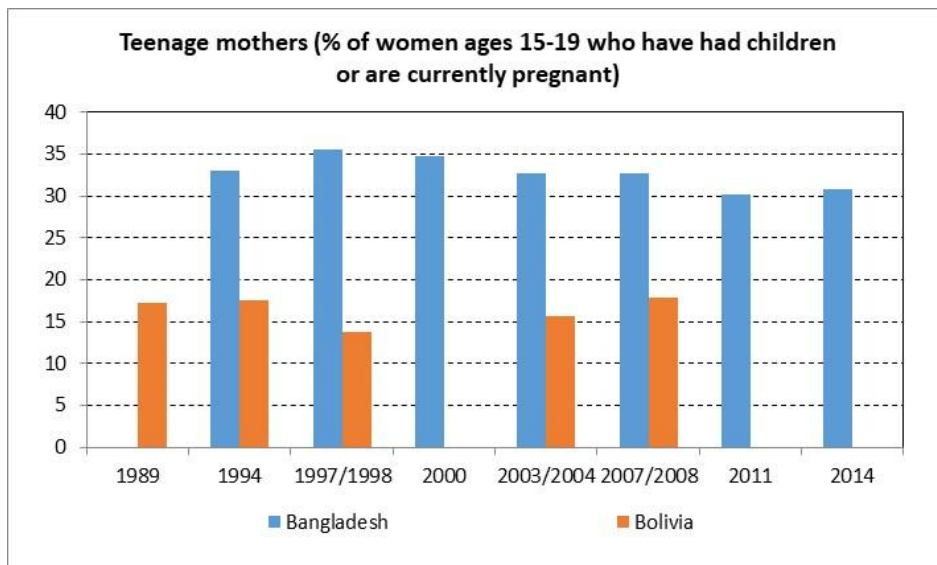
Figure 5: Adolescent Fertility Rates in Bangladesh and Bolivia, 1970-2014



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2016).

Despite that Bangladesh’s adolescent fertility rates are approaching those of Bolivia, Figure 6 shows that there is still a big difference in terms of the percent of teenage pregnancies in the two countries. Although Bangladesh has a better depreciating rate than Bolivia in recent years, Bolivia’s overall percentage of girls who are pregnant in their teenage years is much lower than in Bangladesh.

Figure 6: Teenage Pregnancies



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2016).

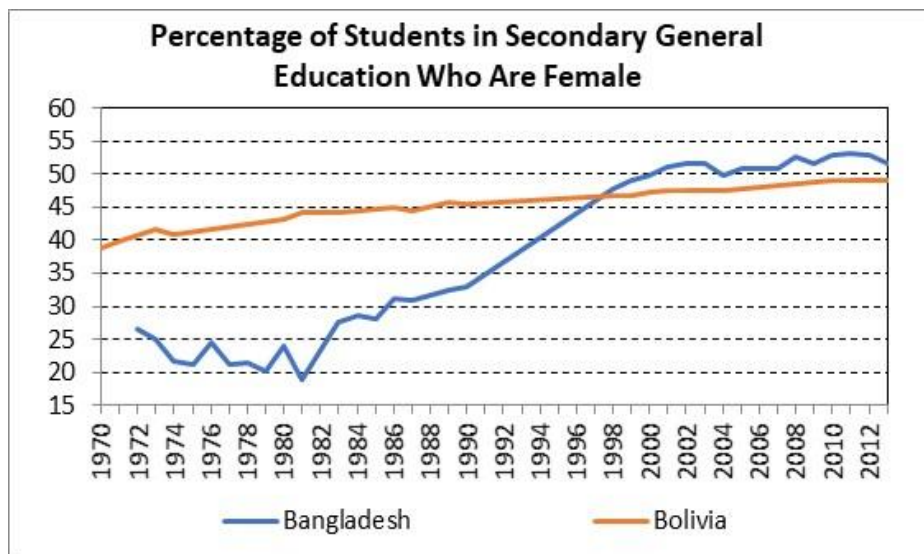
IV.3. Education Delays Marriage and Childbearing

When looking at literature on the topic, the correlation between marriage and childbearing is almost taken for granted. Due to the cultural stigma around marriage and childbearing, newly-wed females tend to have a child very soon after marrying because religion and community standards strongly prohibit extramarital relations. There is also the cultural idea that remains: the primary purpose of women should be to care for their children. Reid (2012) recognizes this trend of domestic expectations for women in Bolivia, too. Furthermore, Bates, Maselko and Schuler (2007) raise that mothers and mothers-in-law have a large influence over when their children have children of their own.

Schurmann (2009) describes the ways in which Bangladesh has attempted to combat high rates of child marriage and adolescent fertility. She reviews the Female Secondary School Stipend Project (FSP), which was launched in 1994 with the primary aim of delaying marriage and decreasing fertility. The program attempts to accomplish this by paying tuition-fees and providing monthly stipends for unmarried rural girls until the tenth grade. One of the requirements of the FSP is to stay unmarried. Hence, more girls are expected to wait until they finish school to marry.

Figure 7 shows the overall percentages of female students from 1970 to 2013 in Bangladesh and Bolivia. While Bangladesh has not made any progress in the 1970s, the percentage of secondary students who are female have sharply increased from 1981 until 2002. During 2002-2013, more than half of the secondary students were actually female; that is, the number of female secondary students is exceeding that of the number of male secondary students in Bangladesh. With about 40 percent of female secondary students in the 1970s, Bolivia started with much higher percentages of female secondary students than Bangladesh, but has made relatively little progress over time. Nevertheless, Bolivia nearly reached parity in male and female secondary students in the last few years. Reid (2012) explains that Bolivia has made significant movements toward gender equality with the passing of The Bolivian Educational Reform and localized efforts to create gender-sensitive environments.

Figure 7: Percentage of Secondary Students Who Are Female



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2016).

Combining the information provided in Figures 5 and 7, it seems clear that education has contributed to reducing adolescent fertility rates in both, Bangladesh and Bolivia. It is also clear that Bangladesh's Female Secondary School Stipend Project (FSP) has contributed to the high female secondary enrollments. However, the decline in Bangladesh's adolescent fertility rates started at least a decade before the implementation of the FSP.

Schurmann (2009) reports that continuing girls' education in Bangladesh is more frequently viewed as marriage capital, rather than human capital. In other words, many families support increasing a girl's education not to empower her to enter the workforce or develop skills that will help her later in life, but instead to improve her likeliness of marrying a man of high stature. A big part of these cultural thoughts in Bangladesh emerges from the role of poverty in identifying gender roles and expectations for young women, which will be discussed more below.

IV.3. Cultural Factors and Female Empowerment

Culture plays a substantial role keeping girls out of schools and increasing their likeliness of succumbing to child marriage in both Bangladesh and Bolivia. Schurmann (2009) and Reid (2012) identify ways that young women are limited by gendered expectations, respectively in Bangladesh and Bolivia.

In Bangladesh, women are "sequestered to the domestic sphere" through traditional practice of purdah, in which women are secluded and completely covered by clothing when around men who are not blood-related (Schurmann). Even though that the legal age for getting married in Bangladesh is currently 18 years, Schurmann (2009) explains that girls are traditionally considered eligible for marriage as soon as they start menstruation.

While Bolivia's numbers for child marriages are considerably lower than those for Bangladesh, child marriage remains a cultural problem, which Reid (2012) refers to as *marianismo*. While machismo (a strong, almost aggressive, male dominance) prevails as a way of thinking in much of Latin America, marianismo is another way of identifying the role of a woman. As Reid (2012) describes it, being a woman means being a mother. For example, Reid uses a specific example in which the girls that attend school watch their teacher juggle a child while she teaches. These girls learn from a young age that their primary role should be a caretaker.

Girls Not Brides⁴ explains that there is a proverb in Bangladesh "Khuritay Buri", which translates to "Bengali girls become old when they turn 20." Therefore, families believe they must marry their children off early because their culture supports that girls as young as 15-years-old are ready for marriage. The example of Rubi, a 19-year-old Bangladesh girl featured in a post on Girls Not Bride's website, illustrates the pressure parents put on their daughters to get married.

In any case, Bangladesh's sharp decline in adolescent fertility has been influenced by a slight shift of ideologies concerning women and marriage, as well as the above reported gender-equality within Bangladeshi schools. Girls now also have more access to resources from organizations like Girls Not Brides to fight the pressures of marrying early. Girls Not Brides has worked to be the voice of young women in Bangladesh, especially as the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017

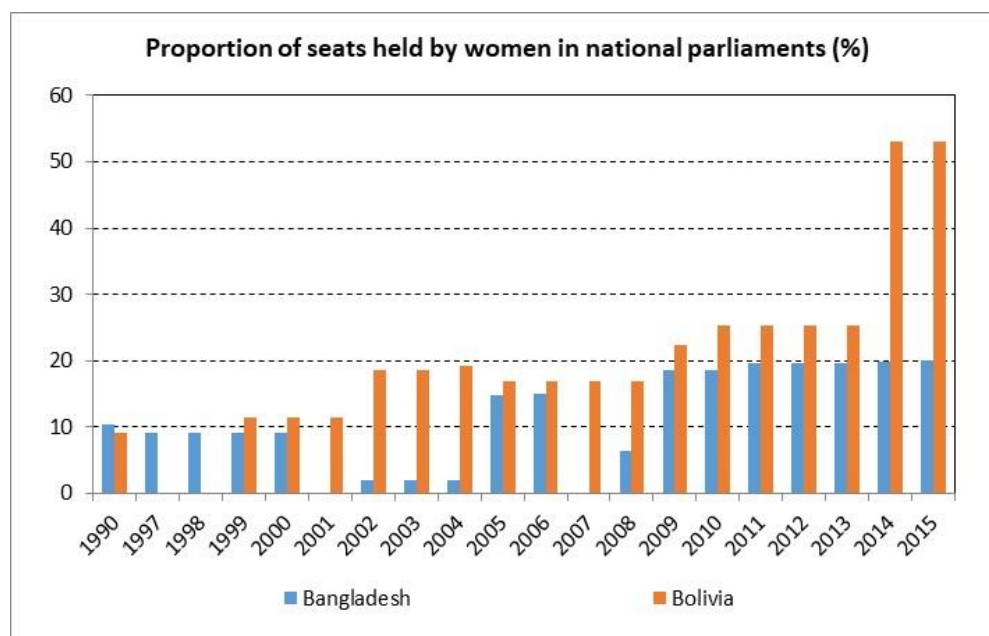
⁴ Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 800 civil society organizations committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their potential; Girls Not Brides was initiated in September 2011 by The Elders, a group of independent global leaders working together for peace and human rights. For further information, see: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/>.

passed in February 2017. This law would uphold that a girl must be 18-years-old to marry; however, Girls Not Brides and others have argued against the act because it allows exceptions to this rule in special cases, which are not defined. Girls Not Brides and others have argued that evidence from global experience has shown that requiring parental and court consent does not protect girls from child marriage. Girls Not Brides Bangladesh expects that these requirements could be widely abused and effectively eliminate a minimum age of marriage in Bangladesh.

Figure 8 demonstrates that women have been given more opportunities in both countries to become involved in government. With exception of 1990, Bolivia's women always had a higher representation in national parliament than Bangladeshi women, though the difference was sometimes marginal. But in 2014 and 2015, Bolivia has visibly surpassed not only Bangladesh in the percentage of seats held by women in national parliament, but Bolivia's women have also surpassed Bolivia's men in parliament. The explanation behind this sharp increase is not clear. The cultural traditions of machismo and marianismo perpetuate ideas that limit a women's agency in daily life; however, something must have changed in the minds of many Bolivians that women leadership would spike to such an extent as shown in Figure 8.

Though less steady, women have also increased their representation in Bangladesh's parliament. In 1990 and from 1997-2000, Bangladeshi women had nearly ten percent of the parliamentary seats. It then declined to below five percent from 2002 to 2004, which is quite significant, though an explanation for such a sharp decrease is not clear. Fortunately, despite some volatility, the representation of Bangladeshi women in parliament increased again in 2005, and during 2009-2015, reached or nearly reached 20 percent.

Figure 8: Parliament Seats Held by Women



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2016).

While administrative policy or other legal decisions could play a role, there must have been a significant cultural shift towards women parliamentarians in both countries. In addition to women in government, Bates, Maselko and Schuler (2007) measure a women's empowerment by the agency she has in making small or large purchases, her involvement in major decisions, and her freedom from family domination.

IV.4. Influence of Poverty on Education and Child Marriage

In addition to culture-centered female empowerment, poverty acts as a significant driver of child marriage. Concerning Bangladesh, Schurmann (2009) recognizes that younger girls require a lower dowry, so marrying their child off as soon as possible may seem like the best option for a low-income family. Therefore, the decision to get married is largely driven by the needs of the family. Similarly, Bates, Maselko and Schuler (2007) state that Bangladeshi parents often make the decisions about marriage and childbearing.

Schurmann (2009) also explains that many families in Bangladesh view education in terms of profit. When it comes to educating young girls, many poor families conclude that, even if the female child can use the advantages of her education to attain a good job and earn a significant sum of money, that money would just transfer to her husband's family after marriage. Because the parents of girls do not view education as economical, these girls have even less opportunity of being enrolled in school.

Due to the parents' cultural perspective on marriage as a way out of poverty, many do not understand the immense benefits of delaying marriage and prolonging education. According to Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2002), girls who attend an extra year of primary school boost their future earnings by 15 percent, a percentage that increases with the more time spent in school. However, women succeeding in the workplace is not common in Bangladesh, especially in the rural regions, so these statistics do not offer much realistic hope for many poor families.

Bolivia, on the other hand, has an income per capita that is more than double that of Bangladesh, and a lot less Bolivians live below \$1.90 or \$3.10 a day, as the Empirical Background section demonstrates. That difference in income and poverty levels helps explain why only 22 percent of Bolivian girls are married by their eighteenth birthday, while 52 percent of 18-year-olds are married in Bangladesh.

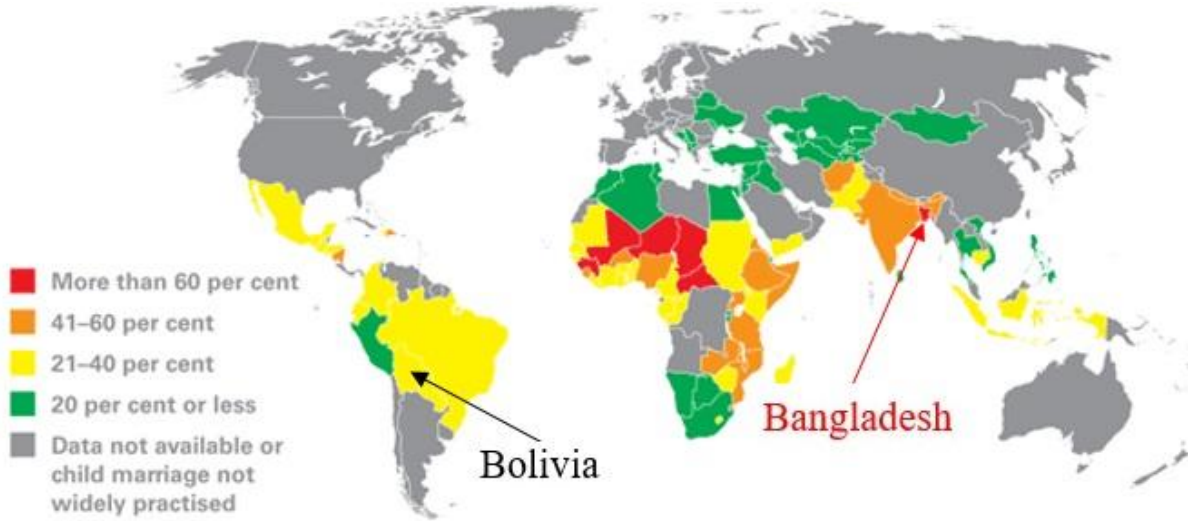
Further supporting the correlation between poverty and child marriage, there is a strong correlation between income per capita of a country and the age at which females get married for the first time. So, countries with lower incomes per capita, like Bangladesh, will have more first marriages at a young age in comparison with countries who have higher incomes. In fact, Girls Not Brides reports that girls from poor families are more than three times as likely to marry before 18, compared with girls from wealthier families.⁵

Figure 9 provides a map that visualizes the prevalence of child marriage across the world, while Figure 10 shows GDP per capita around the globe. Comparing Figure 9 with Figure 10 shows that child marriage is correlated with the overall income per capita. Due to many intertwining factors, such as education and other policy reforms, the correlation between GDP per capita and child marriage is not perfect. However, it is notable that the countries marked by the three darkest blue

⁵ See <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/why-does-it-happen/>.

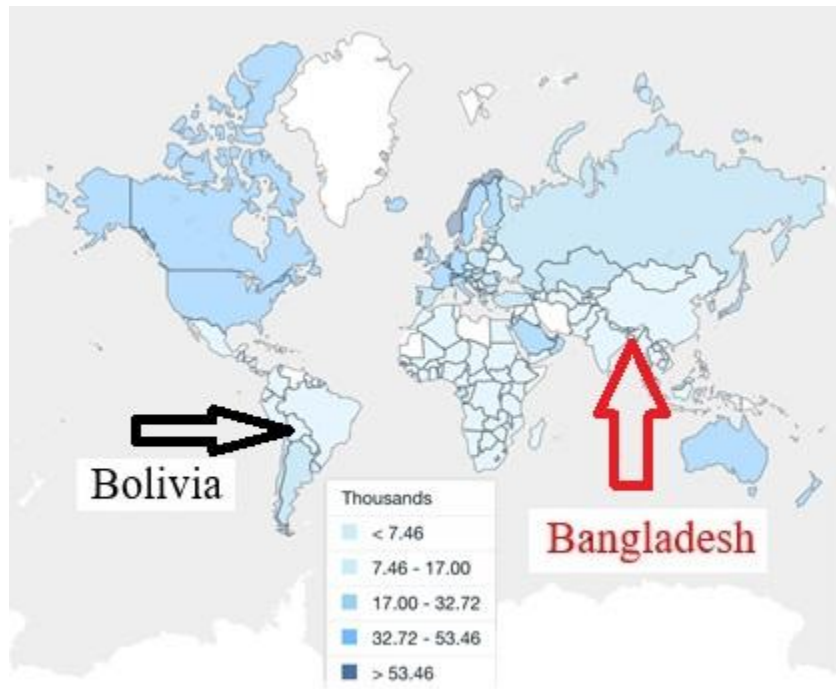
shades in Figure 10 (which are countries with GDP per capita above \$17,000) have either no data available on child marriage or child marriage is not widely practiced.

Figure 9: Percentage of women aged 20–24, who were married before age 18



Source: UNICEF global databases, 2007, based on MICS, DHS and other national surveys, 1987–2006; as posted at https://www.unicef.org/progressforchildren/2007n6/index_41848.htm; arrows identifying Bangladesh and Bolivia added by author.

Figure 10: GDP per capita Across the World (PPP, constant 2011 international \$)



Source: World Bank (2016); arrows identifying Bangladesh and Bolivia added by author.

V. Conclusion

In Bangladesh, 52 percent of girls get married by the age of 18. In Bolivia, 18 percent of girls get married by the age of 18. At the basis of this article is the question: why does the current percent of child marriages in Bangladesh surpass the percent of child marriages in Bolivia by such a large margin?

A simple answer to this question does not readily appear as too many factors influence the age at which a girl gets married. Based on the data provided in the Empirical Background section, it is clear that Bangladesh has a much lower GDP per capita than Bolivia, and poverty is far more common in Bangladesh than in Bolivia. On the other hand, life expectancy is actually higher in Bangladesh than in Bolivia. In Figure 5, we then showed that Bangladesh and Bolivia seem to be almost at par when it comes to adolescent fertility rates. Yet, Figure 6 has shown the teenage pregnancy is about twice in Bangladesh than in Bolivia. On the other hand, Figure 7 showed that Bangladesh has recently surpassed Bolivia in the percentage of female students in secondary education. Yet, Figure 8 has shown that the presentation of women is now much higher in Bolivia than in Bangladesh.

Beyond the numbers, many differences arise regarding cultural norms. Behind the looming issue of child marriage, for both countries, is a social infrastructure that cannot be swayed by government interference. The traditions of purdah and marianismo, in Bangladesh and Bolivia respectively, and families' ideas about investing in their female children, overpower the child's wish to continue her education and delay marriage. What separates Bangladesh and Bolivia then, is their unique culture.

To be clear, this article is not calling for cultural assimilation or termination. Instead, it is important that policy-makers and outside interventionist organizations, such as Girls Not Brides, understand the implications of child marriage. Bangladesh remains a much poorer country than Bolivia, and without significantly lowering the number of people living on a mere \$3.10 a day, the effects of poverty will continue to influence child marriage and perpetuate a culture of female submission. In any case, in order to eliminate child marriages, Bangladesh and Bolivia must continue to balance economic progression with increased human development and female empowerment.

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