

The Causal Effect of Early Marriage on Women's Empowerment: Evidence from Bangladesh

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Abstract:

Timing of marriage is a key premarital parental decision that is likely to influence a girl's future intra-household bargaining power and participation in household decision making, in turn affecting her overall empowerment in her spousal household which, as several studies indicate, is key to the welfare of a family. In this paper, we explore the causal effect of early marriages of girls on their empowerment in the spousal household using a recently collected nationally representative household survey from Bangladesh. Our empirical strategy uses the natural variation in age at menarche to instrument for age at marriage and isolate its causal effect on women's empowerment, which is measured using the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index. We find that delayed marriages result in significantly higher empowerment scores which is a consequence of empowerment in their autonomy in production, control over income, ownership of assets, and ability to speak in public. Further analysis reveals that the effects appear to be due (at least in part) to a reduction in the incidence of intimate partner violence and fertility decisions as well as increased freedom of mobility and ability to participate in work outside home.

Keywords: Early marriage; Women's Empowerment; Intimate Partner Violence; Instrumental Variable; Bangladesh.

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