

Women on the Move

Early Marriages for Women : A Sad Trend

by Muneera Parbeen

MARRIAGE in Bangladesh is very much like "putulor khela" or a game with dolls. It is manipulated by a few adults and the result of their desires which are dumped onto an innocent (and sometimes unwanted) pair. In most of these marriages the couples have very little to say and in almost all, the bride has nothing to say at all. Arranged marriages are traditional in our society and it actually has a large number of positive advantages. However, this system has been misused, or rather, abused for so long that its present remaining form is mostly a mockery of the entire process. This is not to say that all marriages that are arranged go like this, but it is sad that in many cases the groom may get to have quite a lot to say about his choices and preferences but the bride none.

The process of choosing a bride for a prospective groom in our country is a very lengthy one and in almost all cases, it is difficult to find a "couple" suited in every way. The requirements of a "bride" are lengthy and detailed and as much as her physical beauty is vital, a very recent trend is the age of the bride. Every man seems to be looking for a very young bride — preferably between 17 to 19.

In the old days, women

were given hardly any rights and so an early marriage was very much accepted by all. We pride ourselves very much as to our development in recent times and advertise it far and wide in bold letters. But have we really come very far in terms of emancipation. We had our grandmothers who used to be married at fourteen or fifteen and now after all our "progress" our girls are being married off at sixteen or seventeen. So much for all our pride.

Early marriages are extremely common in rural areas, especially the poor who cannot afford anything and they think that an early marriage is "good riddance" of their burden — the daughter who has to be married while she is still in her prime. Nowadays, however, early marriages, for girls that is, is very popular among the "nouveau riche." In most families where money is more prominent than education, it's a must that daughters have to be married before they are twenty at the most. Early marriages are especially popular among the "upper crust" families who hail from a Urdu/Hindi background, i.e. parts of India or Pakistan. Daughters in these communities are brought up with nothing more than the knowledge that they have to be married soon, their very existence seems to be for this purpose. Such girls consider (as they have been taught to think) that a High School degree as SSC or O'Levels is "high ambition" for they end up in the matrimonial knot by the time they reach class nine

or ten, at the most. It's sad to see that this kind of a "medieval" approach is itself being caught up in full swing in almost all of our upper class communities.

What does a girl gain by an early marriage? They are certainly taken over by the glamour, glitz and romance surrounding a marriage and easily give their consent, little do they understand what they are getting into. Families prefer a young bride chiefly because it is easy to make her adapt to their own families. In such cases, the new bride can easily be "moulded" into the kind of personality that their husband or in-laws wish. A young girl has very few ideas of her own and even if she does, certainly has no voice to state them with. She is easily trapped into a family life by bearing a child soon after her marriage and then, her life has no real meaning other than to sit back and bring up the young ones, again guided by others.

It is very unfortunate, that young girls don't have a complete childhood or youth, nor a college/university life with friends. Instead they are cruelly launched into a very adult world where their chief duty is to look nice (and pleased) and entertain and nothing more. A girl at her young age finds it difficult to cope, gets no importance from anyone and ends up with a life which though may be materialistically not so bad, quite emotionally unfulfilling. Being less educated and much much younger than her husband, the young wife, finds it difficult to grow up a real emotional attachment to her "groom" and is very often left down in a terrible world of which she understands very little. The initial glamour and charm of parties, new clothes and jewellery lose their glitter all too soon and very swiftly she is haled into a life restricted by a thousand "do's and don'ts" and requirements. She has very few friends to share her feelings with. She finds herself left in a world where she (being out of touch with so much of this fast-moving world) realises that everyone, including her own family are like strangers

to her. Dissatisfaction, a feeling of unworthiness and an overall coating of negligence pushes her into a darker corner.

As she struggles to regain some of her lost life, she invariably ends up as a decorative head of "women's rights" board (or other similar charities) or ends up with the booze if all fails. It is therefore, not a very surprising result that in such marriages divorces at a late age, extra marital affairs and endless bounds of unfaithfulness is very common. It is sad to see that again a parallel can be drawn between these unfortunate lives of the very poor and those of the affluent. One should not jump into the conclusion that the husband gets away with it all. Marriage to a very young bride may fulfill some of his wishes but it is inevitable that he too may end up in a very similar situation. With a wife who is not compatible, he too loses interest and moves away. The only advantage for men in such marriages is that they make their own choices and remain "master of the game" all throughout.

Very early marriage of women is a very unfortunate social disease. It should have been eliminated a long long time ago. But alas time doesn't seem to have done a lot for us women. Marriage is not a child's play and therefore shouldn't be treated as such. Every young woman should be given a chance to understand what life is all about before decisions concerning it are imposed on her. Early marriage robs many girls of their health. How many get the love and affection they need for the harder stages of life they go through such as the difficult stages of motherhood? Forcing her into something she understands nothing of, certainly does not show respect for her as a human being. Yet this terrible violation of human rights is going on in our society everyday.



Let her not be robbed of her childhood

— Photograph: Zorgen Schytte

Notes from a Field Diary

by Farah Ghuznavi



Away from life city's madness, people enjoy the simple pleasures of life.

As I relax on the drive from Jhenidah to Faridpur, I am struck once again by the beauty of the surrounding countryside. The riverbank sparkles in the sunlight, and the boats sail serenely on the blue, blue water. It is a sunny winter day, and there are only a few people to be seen walking along the highway. The sky is such a bright blue that it almost hurts your eyes, and puffy white clouds drift by every now and then. On both sides of the road, the emerald green paddy fields stretch as far as the eye can see, and beyond that densely packed trees line the horizon. A few small huts can be seen nestled amidst the lush vegetation. Looking out on this view, you would never think that Bangladesh was a country with a population problem. Where are all the people?

There are many small incidents to enjoy on the drive. Everywhere we go, we see children of all sizes in the fields, taking advantage of the lower water levels in winter to catch fish with their hands. Some are successful, others less so. We even see one woman, who is fishing so successfully in a ditch that she can barely keep up with the fish that seem to be throwing themselves onto her hands, and keeps flinging them behind her. Unnoticed by her, some chickens wander up to the pile of fish and start decimating her catch. As she suddenly catches sight of them, her fishing is abandoned as she indignantly chases the chickens away.

Although it is winter, the sunlight is very bright, and it is surprisingly hot. We pause

briefly as part of the queue of traffic waiting to cross a narrow bridge, and I spy a dog sitting in the shade of a bullock cart. As the cart owner pushes his cart a few yards further forward, inching closer to the bridge, the dog finds that the patch of shade has shifted. Undaunted, he gets up and lies down again once he has caught up with the bullock cart. This routine continues a couple more times until the bullock cart finally reaches the bridge, at which point the dog wanders off to lie under a tree.

In several of the fields, we see rows of white plastic bags tied onto sticks, standing amidst the vegetables. We are briefly puzzled until we realise that the aim is for them to play the role of scarecrows; they shift in the wind and frighten off hungry birds. There is no end to the ingenuity of the Bangladeshi farmer. Given the challenges that people in this country have to face on a day to day basis in order to survive in an often hostile environment, that is perhaps not altogether surprising. Recycling is the name of the game here, and it's been going on for far longer than environmentalism has been in vogue.

As I settle back and appreciate the serene beauty that surrounds me, I spare a thought for the visitors whose entire experience of Bangladesh is limited to Dhaka, as well as the Dhakaites who dwell in that bustling, overcrowded, polluted city.

The writer is the Deputy Executive Director of Sapta-gram Swanirvar Parishad.



Kargalini Sufla enchanting the crowd with her Lalou Geeti on International Women's Day. — Star photo

A Cool Head for Figures

Padma Roy Paladhy has been working in a bank for 22 years, beginning at the bottom, learning on the job. She is not baffled or bored with awesome columns of figures to be calculated. Her colleagues call her didi and she is seen working at her desk every banking day. Today she feels equal to the men around her and is a good example of how women can succeed in a man's world. Fayza Haq spent some time with her, talking.

DS: Since banking is predominantly a male profession what made you come into banking?

Padma: I did not join banking directly. In '74 there was an advertisement in Grindley's for a telephone operator. I took this up to get pocket money. Two years later, there was a vacancy for a tele operator. I did this for six years and learnt about transfer of money. I did some paper work in other department as I had time in my hand. In '83 a cash booth was set up at Gulshan and I began working there. Right now I am in charge of issuing traveller's cheques — and this is part of customer service. I have not learnt banking separately — I learnt while I was working.

DS: Do you enjoy your work?

Padma: I do, as I meet people from various places. Though the work is routine but the people are not. I have never thought about changing my profession.

DS: Do your long hours conflict with your family?

Padma: As I don't have a family of my own the question does not arise. My mother and elder sisters are used to my long hours. Earlier too, I did not work with balance sheets. When I began my banking work at Gulshan I dealt with various things: people checking cash, opening accounts, and depositing cash.

DS: Do you find it difficult to work in a male dominant environment?

Padma: In ANZ, and even when it was known as Grindley's, we have never had any problem. The women have always got along very well working alongside the men.

DS: What is your opinion of the present banking policy?

Padma: As I am working for the traveller's cheques department, I appreciate the fact that the bank has made it possible for travellers to carry

currency with them when they travel. They have relaxed some of the regulations. The quota is \$3000 per person per year. I think this is good enough for tourist purposes. For medical reasons, if you have the necessary papers you can take up to \$10,000. For studies purpose too the regulations are relaxed.

DS: Do you think the foreign banks are playing an important role in the economy of Bangladesh?

Padma: Foreign banks tend to function in an efficient way and this sets a good standard for the local banks.

DS: What is your impression of the Beijing Conference?

Padma: It was a good idea to project and promote women from the third world countries. In this way more people will get to know about them. It might inspire the women who watched the on-goings on TV to come out and work for themselves.

DS: What is your opinion of the Miss Bangladesh pageant?

Padma: In my opinion it wasn't much to talk about.

DS: You have been working in the bank for 22 years — how does your family feel about it?

Padma: Anyone would be proud to have a working family member. I have to put in more than the nine-to-five schedule and my people don't mind this in the least.

DS: What do you do in your spare time?

Padma: As I usually return home by 7.30 pm there is time for anything else but watching TV and reading books. On weekends I visit friends. On my holidays I go abroad, mostly to India as most of my relations are in West Bengal. After visiting them I go off by myself to some seaside resort. I live in Kakrail, which, fortunately, is not far from my office in Moti-heel, and I go to the workplace and come back from there by rickshaw, and usually have lunch at the office.

Health and the Working Women

by Neale MacMillan

THE three-hour trip from Quito to Sigchos in Ecuador's Andean highlands winds along steep, narrow gorges, down green slopes and through hillside pastures and crops. Dr Patricia Costales has travelled this bumpy road often over the past two years. Her colleagues at the Health research and Consultancy Centre (CEAS) — Drs Jaime Breilh and Arturo Campanas — accompany her on many of these trips to meet the women of this mestizo farming community of some 2,000 families.

The CEAS team has also been travelling closer to its base in Quito to meet two other groups of women: administrative workers in government offices and textile factory workers. Despite the different work environments, all of these women find their health affected by conditions peculiar to their gender. They all face heavy domestic duties on top of daytime occupations and experience significant social inequities compared with men.

In a project supported by IDRC, CEAS set out to analyze the most important factors associated with gender, lifestyle and working conditions that determine the health status of working women.

The CEAS team surveyed 270 women office workers in rural areas. CEAS surveyed another 270 women, comparing those in Sigchos with those in a community of the tropical forest region of eastern Ecuador.

The team surveyed 315 women in the textile and garment industry, which relies on a predominantly female workforce. But project leader Jaime Breilh said they had to approach dozens of medium-sized factories before finding nine owners willing to participate. "Their factories are like feudal castles — entrance inside is very difficult."



Ecuadorian women's health is determined not only by their working conditions but also by a lack of gender equity within the household and society.

The CEAS researchers followed a model of participatory research in which the women assisted in administering questionnaires about their living and working conditions, health problems, and access to health care.

Decaying Workplace

A visit to offices at the ministry of health revealed a build-

ing from the 1960s with inadequate lighting and overcrowded offices, and poorly maintained furniture. The floors and carpets are deteriorating and cleaning is infrequent.

Adriana Insuasti, president of the secretaries' association, said that only a few months ago there were 115 women employees. "But because of government downsizing, we are now only 40, with triple the workload," she said.

"We have found massive levels of stress in the office environment," said Arturo Campanas.

On top of a poor working environment, the women of the office employees perform virtually all household tasks without any help from husbands. The health impact is seen not only in stress but in related mental health problems, anemia and increased menstruation.

In the garment factories a high correlation was found between stress level and length of service. At a morning meeting with women workers in the factory cafeteria, a woman complained that constant pressure from female supervisors to increase production was one source of stress. "There is no communication between workers and supervisors. They make us nervous, they get on your nerves," she said.

Other health impacts for the garment workers are felt in back, leg, neck and arm pain from hours of sitting at machinery, and respiratory problems from high concentrations of dust and fluff from textiles and thread.

"Is noise a problem?" Jaime Breilh asked the women in the cafeteria. "Yes" came the resounding response.

NEALE MacMillan, Associate Editor of IDRC Reports.

NEWS BRIEF

Violence Against Women

Compiled by SMS Joya

The Daily Star — 25.2.96 (Jhenidah) An eight-year-old girl was chopped to death at Anipur village in Saikupa thana yesterday. The girl was killed by a rival group over a land dispute. Her mother and sister were also injured.

A case has been filed at the local thana. However, none was arrested so far.

The Daily Ittefaq 25.2.96 CHUAMUHANI: A young girl, her mother and another female relative were raped allegedly by a local BNP leader and his gang.

On February 22, a man from Sudharam district of Vinodpur village was returning home with his wife, daughter and a female relative from Chittagong. The incident took place when they were looking for a baby-taxi at Karimpur at mid-night. At that time, Md Abul Kashem (BNP senior assistant chairman of Chau-muhani and assistant chairman of Nationalist Labour Party of Noakhali) along with 5/6 men attacked them. They flogged and tied the man up to take the women to a hotel near Hawkers Market and then raped consecutively.

By sheer luck, the girl managed to escape and asked people for help. Once the news spread, Abul Kashem took the women to his own house at Pantipur, later,

Bagumganj district police arrested Abul Kashem and rescued the women.

On the same day, Kashem was denied of bail and sent to jail.

The Daily Janakantha — 27.2.96. A housewife, Shahida (17), of Chilmari thana in Kurigram lost her right eye over a feud on dowry.

Shahida, daughter of Abdul Latif a day-labourer, was forcibly married off to Chand Mia (a mute). Latif only agreed because Chand's family didn't ask for any dowry at that time.

However, soon after the marriage took place, Chand's family started claiming Tk 10,000 from her. Failing to collect the money from her poor parents, Shahida had to go through brutalities from Chand's family. They even asked her to act as a prostitute. After sometime, she took shelter with her brother-in-law (Anis) and wife, in the same village, who weren't any different from the others.

One Thursday morning, she got into a brawl with Anis, and at one point he stroke her right eye with a chopper. The village people took her to a local hospital from where she was transferred to Rangpur Medical College Hospital. Doctors declared her eye to be totally blinded.



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