

Too Young to Wed: End Child Marriage

The first ever International Day of the Girl Child

JNFPA and The Daily Star organised a roundtable on 'Too Young to Wed: End Child Marriage- the first ever International Day of the Girl Child' on September 27, 2012. We publish a summary of the discussions
-- Editor

Mahfuz Anam, Editor and Publisher, The Daily Star
Child marriage issue is a national issue. It is a human rights issue, an ethical issue, definitely a political issue and an issue that entails the future of Bangladesh, therefore we must all work to prevent it. Child marriage is a term that camouflages many things. We also do not know the variation of their ages, the average could be 15 or 16 but sometimes even earlier. Basically it is an issue of fundamental rights of the girl who is being married off at an early age. It is influencing the rest of her whole life. There are of course also many happy marriages, but those cannot be the sole base of social policy. Bangladesh has made real advancements in many social indicators, but child marriage continues to be a persistent issue. Print media and audio visual media at this point must play a role. Multi-dimensional presentation of this issue in the media may result in a better situation. Dramas and serials can be very significant tools in fighting this social issue. I would be very happy, from The Daily Star, to take the initiative to inviting other media to address this issue collectively.

Arthur Erken, Country Representative, UNFPA
In 2011, the United Nations designated October 11 as the International Day of Girl Child. This year is the first time this day is being celebrated. UNFPA and The Daily Star have decided to focus on the issue of ending child marriage because, which Bangladesh has made tremendous progress, in the areas of health, education, economic growth, still two-thirds of all girls in this country are married before the legal age of 18 years. Half of all girls are married by the age of 16, and this statistic has not moved much in recent decades. Girls in this country get married off with husbands who are on average nine years older. So, a girl of 15 or 16 gets married to a man of 24 or 25 years old. Policy makers and others concerned about this issue should think why this particular issue is still persistent in Bangladesh. We need to find ways in how to tackle this issue, because child marriage is not only a clear violation of girls' rights, it directly affects the health and well-being of a girl, her family and her community.

Michael Mc Grath, Country Director, Save the Children
Child marriage issue underlies so many problems that affect communities, families, societies and children of Bangladesh. Dealing with this unifying issue will help us to make progress in a very significant way.
Child marriage benefits nobody. Child marriage breaches the girl's rights. Children have a right according to the international law to good health, good education, and protection. From the moment the girl gets married, her husband and his family will decide what her future will be. One of the first casualties of child marriage is that married girls

drop out of school and discontinue their education. The girl's health is the next victim. The rate of maternal deaths of under-aged mothers is substantially greater than for older women. Statistics shows that maternal death rate of girls of 14 years and younger is 50 higher than the age of 18 to 20s. The background paper from UNFPA reveals one of the most disturbing issues that young girls are having, namely obstetric fistula. These little girls are too young to have babies. It does tremendous damage to their physiology. It ruins their chances of having enjoyable sexual intercourse; it can ruin their chances of having children; it causes them intestinal problems; it makes them unable to urinate in the usual way; it causes disaster to their life. That can cause them to be abandoned by their husbands or pushed out by their husbands' family. It makes it difficult for them to work and live a normal life. Some cases are curable, some are not. These are direct complications of early marriage and early pregnancy. Moreover, it has a direct impact upon children. The rate of neonatal mortality is 50% higher in case of teenage mothers than matured mothers. Child marriage is going to effect immediately upon the survival rate of the child. How can we seriously think that a mother of 12 or 13 can raise a child? These children will more likely to be sick, are less educated, and will have less negotiation power within their marriage. In addition, under-aged mothers are more vulnerable to domestic violence. Statistics shows that there is 16% increase in domestic violence in Bangladesh for teenage brides.

A baseline study that Save the Children undertook in 2007 showed the average age of marriage was 14.7 years. We have done two studies more since then. One of them showed the average age to be 14.4. And the most recent one showed it to be 14.2 years of age. We can't say that the situation is getting worse, but it certainly didn't get better in the last 5 years in that particular locality. So, this is a really tough nut to crack. Why is this difficult? Why do households make this decision to marry their girls off at an early (before 18 years) age? There are several reasons. One of the reasons is that girls are getting sexual harassed, for instance in the streets on their way to schools. It's called 'eve teasing' in Bangladesh, but sexual harassment is a better term for this, as nobody gets teased, girls and women get physically touched, being called names, and they get talked about in the community in attempts to damage their reputation. It discourages them from going to school. Parents want to safeguard them, want to safeguard their marriage chances, so the girl gets married off by her parents to 'protect' her.

Another reason is dowry. A study showed that there is a very clear linear increase in the dowry for every year the girl's marriage gets delayed. So, as a very poor father he has a reason to marry his girl off earlier. If he waits, it can go to a point where he can no longer afford the dowry or she will be married to someone who is maybe mentally incapacitated or maybe a very old, divorced man. All the local leaders and authorities say that they oppose it, but they are not dealing with the real problem. The issue is that we have to stop harassment, dowry and, consequently, the child marriage across the entire community. We have to work to create a climate where child marriages become unacceptable. We can highlight the economic damage that happen because of child marriages. We should



work with communities and the government to develop detailed action plans and to move towards real action. That is the challenge. Bangladesh has shown that it can change! We just need the collective will to do so!

Md. Ashraf Hossain, DG, Department of Women Affairs



From the government side, the DWAs is the official promoter of women's empowerment issues. We consider this day important as it raises awareness about gender

equality. We mentioned that this day is especially dedicated for the girl child. Still, in our society, a boy gets preference, which is contradictory to the real spirit of gender equality. From that perspective, interventions related to ending child marriages are very relevant.

In that regard, a lot of social campaigns and community mobilization is going on. The culture is such that we are advocating for others to do things, but do not include ourselves. From my official position, I would like to say that we have to combat the curse of child marriage. We have to identify the psychosocial and socio-economic conditions that encouraging child marriage. We have to target future generations, in particular the adolescents in order to make them aware in a positive way. We live in a patriarchal society, where we were being nourished with a lot of gender discriminating practices. We should engage boys as well as girls with different gender sensitive practices. We have already piloted one programme by organizing boys and girls in a club where gender sensitive culture is promoted and to be inculcated in their attitude and practices.

Dr. A.K.M Nurun Nabi, Professor, Department of Population Science, University of Dhaka



"Child marriage does not benefit anyone". Nobody will contest that statement of Mr. McGrath. Child marriage affects all the targets of MDGs. The health issue is in the

centre. The younger the age the girl gets married off, the higher the rate maternal mortality, which is a big concern for us because we have one of the highest rates of child mortality and maternal

mortality.

Let me focus on the social aspects of child marriage. The BDHS data shows that for the last 10-12 years, we have only been able to increase the age of first marriage for girls by just 1 year. In the Kabinnama and the marriage registration, the girl should be at least 18 years. But actually it is often 14 years or less. The enforcement of the law is much more needed. The first point is to identify the age of the girl; we need documents like the birth registration certificate for this. We have made it mandatory, but it is not enforced properly. Secondly, when we talk about girls, we advocate for the daughters of others, not for our own daughters. So, we should commit ourselves and should take part. I declared in my department that no one should marry or bear a child for the first two years, otherwise they will lose the chances of obtaining a degree. I can't say I have been successful 100%, but I can motivate them. It is important that we prepare the right kind of communication. Anatomies of the success stories tell us that appropriate message is one of the most important factors. We need to create the environment so that the society cannot pressurize the father to marry off his daughter at an early age. We also need a participatory approach by forming a network at every level, consisting of community leaders, political leaders, teachers and students.

The modification of the existing laws is also important. Sending a father to jail as a punishment may make the situation far worse for a family. It is not the right way to prevent child marriage.

Rokeya Kabir, Executive Director, Nari Progoti Songho



Studies of 2009 show that 30% of the girls become mother at the age of 16, and more than 60% become mother at 17. We have to go farther back to find out the root causes of

this situation. In our society, men look for teenage girls as their wives, so that they can dominate them in decision making at every steps of their family life. I would like to share my experience here. I was having a class about gender issue in a programme moderated by government officials. One male participant, who is academically well educated, told the class that he does not think it is right to let married women working outside the home because a man marries a woman for some significant services, not for working outside. Although that per-

son was a government official and well-informed about the laws and constitution, his attitude towards women was shocking. Our perception about women's primary role is the reproductive role.

In our country we also do not have equality in inheritance. Whenever a girl is born in a family the perception is that she does not belongs to the family. Our organization, from the very beginning in the 1990's, started making education gender sensitive, organizing women, and bringing them into the workforce. We are organized a lot of seminars, workshops and studies on the contribution of women in our national economy and how their participation can be improved, how the early marriage and teenage mother affect the family as well as the state from an economic point of view. We are also now piloting some sexual and reproductive health educational programmes. We are working together with the standing committee of the health ministry, the education ministry and the women's affair ministry to introduce this programme.

A gender-sensitive lesson plan should be included in the national curriculum to create the right kind of mind set for both women and men.

Md. Helal Uddin, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Bangladesh



The issue of child marriage is not isolated from other major complications of our society. Muslims practice their day-to-day activities to the standards set by our prophet.

Our prophet got married at the age of 25. He got his only daughter Fatima married off at the age of 18. So, early marriage is also not permissible according to Islam. According to our law, the minimum age for girls to get married is 18 and for boy it is 21. When a marriage registrar registers a marriage he sometimes writes vague ages of the bride and the groom to avoid punishment. If we can ensure that when the registration is taking place, the registrar should see the SSC certificate or at least the birth certificate to confirm the real age otherwise he could be held in jail. This may reduce the child marriage. We are imparting training to the imams and other religious leaders through the Islamic Foundation. In that curriculum, child marriage is one of the major topics to be discussed upon. I will emphasize on the importance of scrutinizing relation