

# Too Young to Wed: End Child Marriage

## The first ever International Day of the Girl Child

papers before marriage registration at our next course for the imams.

**Jyoti Dringra, Joint Programme Coordinator, WFP**



I would like to bring in another dimension of this issue, which is nutrition. The relationship between nutrition and child marriage is that the younger the mother is, the

more likely that the child will be undernourished and an increased rate of maternal and child mortality. The other point is the disempowerment of the girl when she gets married off to a new family; she is at the bottom line of the hierarchy of that family.

The women empowerment issue is directly related to nutrition. This message should be disseminated at the community level. Print and electronic media have a lot to do here to make our community aware.

**Julia Ahmed, Freelance Consultant**



Child marriage is directly related with the key development indicators that are addressed in our six five year plans- maternal health, child health, child education, woman empowerment and also population control.

In the Violence against Women project of CARE, we had addressed broadly two things. One is evidence-based approach and the other is rights-based approach. For us, evidence is important because child marriage and violence against women are major violation of human rights. Researches show that we have to go for behavior change communication at the grass roots level. Changing of behavior is definitely hard when these people are not conscious about their rights. In our project we have tested, developed and operated field tools. One is behavior change communication tool, which may help to find out the underline causes of violence. We gave the men and women different exercises to figure out how they pass their 24 hour times. From those exercises one thing was very prominent that women are really burdened to ensure their productive, reproductive and other social roles. On the other hand, in the rights-based approach we have developed field tools to fight the criticism that although we have laws and policies, they are not working effectively. We have taken the domestic violence law that says about compensation package and we developed a tool kit to measure the cost of domestic violence. That toolkit actually allows us to record all the costs incurred because of violence against women. The proprietor, the family, the victim, all these information were accumulated. So the direct benefit is that domestic violence is not anymore a private issue. The development workers always have to face a common argument that they are intervening in someone's private life but all these incurring factors prove that while domestic violence occurs in the household, it has effects upon the neighborhoods as well as the society.

**Arthur Erken**

What I hear is that there is consensus in general over what the motivators are for fathers and the families to marry their girls off at an early age. Firstly, the fear that their daughters will be or are being harassed, so the issue becomes one of security and prestige for the girl and the family. The second issue is dowry. If these are the main drivers behind child mar-

riage, how can we ensure the security for the family so that it decides to continue their girl's education? We have discussed a lot about what the problems are. But the real issue is how to tackle the situation. How to create a conducive environment in which child marriage is no longer acceptable? I would like to hear more about the solutions to the problem.

**Rowshon Ara, Member, Naripokkho and Dhaka Ahsania Mission**

We are working at the grass roots level to prevent child marriage. The most important point is that the community people try to hide the information from the law enforcement bodies when it comes to child marriage.

The second fact is that we generally use the birth certificate to verify the age of a girl or a boy. But that is a problem when community people collude with the perpetrators.

Parents think that late marriage will create a burden in the form of a larger amount of dowry. So they arrange early marriage for their daughter willingly. Girls are also being harassed at or on the way to their school. Parents also have to face odd talks for sending their daughter to school. We have a law but the proper implementation needs more initiatives. Although government provides some incentives, which motivate the parents to send their girls to school, but these are not sufficient. We need far more budget as well social awareness.

**Towhida Khondker, Director, Bangladesh National Women Lawyer Association (BNWLA)**

No doubt child marriage is a curse for us. But what is the solution? As a lawyer I would like to talk from the perspective of law. In Bangladesh there is a Child Marriage Restraint Act,

enacted in 1929. From my experience I have never seen any case filed under this law. One cause is there are lots of loopholes in the existing law. We also have the Muslim Marriage and Registration Act of 1974. It is also not implemented effectively. Who are the responsible authorities to implement these laws? The reality is that the proper persons have no clear knowledge about their duties and its effectiveness. At my organization, we are working for the establishment of children and women rights, promotion of the gender equality at the local community level by making people aware.

Recently, in 2012, we have filed a petition before the High Court to announce a guideline regarding direction to register all the marriages in our country as far following the national identity card.

In our country, solemnizing the child marriage is an offense, but does not void the marriage if it has happened. This is the conflict of the existing law. On the other hand the Kazi, they have the license to register the marriage but no proper knowledge about our marriage law. BNWLA is operating different programmes, like vote parenting to ensure the child right at the village community level. There are also many initiatives from the government. Finally, proper implementation needs joint efforts of the government and the NGOs.

**Md. Helal Uddin**

There are 55 volume of law in our country but the enforcement situation is miserably poor. High Court also has issued a lot of rules and the enforcement is again 'debat-

able.' We need some thorough studies on the effectiveness of the existing Acts regarding these issues, which may help to find out the loopholes. We have to ensure the maximum impact of the laws.

**Arthur Erken**

There is a tendency that we need more laws, but the reality is that there are enough laws. The problem is the enforcement of these laws. But moreover, the way the fathers and the family act regarding marrying off their young girl that is not only because of lack of knowledge. They have strong rationale behind it. It probably fits certain social beliefs and economic rationale. So the point is that we have to create the environment, where the family will be encouraged to send their daughters to school rather than marrying them off.

**Brig Gen (Retd.) Shahedul Anam Khan, Editor, Op-Ed and Strategic Issues**

In our society household works is not recognized as economic work. So according to many families, women do not do anything, she is a burden on men. These perceptions should be addressed seriously.

**Mamunur Rashid, Coordinator, Gender and development communication Centre (GDCC), Steps Towards Development**



We have plenty of laws but no implementation. I want to clarify that there is punishment for arranging child marriage, but the marriage cannot be revoked. If anything is done illegally that should be revoked. So, the marriage that is occurred illegally should be automatically void and cannot be registered legally.

Coming to the discussion of loopholes of the marriage registration issue, yes there is a High Court verdict, and government issued a circular to register all marriages, which includes the verification of birth certificate and national identity card. But in the registration form there is no place to write down the birth certificate number or the national ID number. So, you cannot really verify from the registration form. We are advocating the government to include these items in the form.

**Tanvir Wahid, Member, UNFPA Youth Forum for Reproductive Health**



I would like to show some statistics regarding early marriage which are really alarming for our country. In a recent BBC News item, it has been reported that Bangladesh has one

of the highest rate of child marriages in the world. Some 20% of all girls are becoming wives before their 15th birthday. These statistics clearly indicate that we have poor knowledge about this issue. We should emphasize more on awareness raising programmes. We need to aware all categories of people, not only in the cities, but also in the villages. We need a complete mixture of the traditional and new strategies. As a youth delegate, I recommend some issues from the perspective of youth. We can form a dedicated youth team to make people aware about the issue. Second one is that child marriage issues should be included in the school books, including the causes and dire consequences of the child marriage. Third one is that we can organize different types of competition like writing competition, quiz competition, film through which young people could be engaged. Nowadays, social media is very popular. We can disseminate

child marriage related information through twitter and other networks.

**Towhida Khondker**

We have to provide our government officials and local representative with training on the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961.

**Michael McGrath**

There should be a legal requirement that the following people have to sign a statement that no dowry was paid and no financial benefits have been obtained from the marriage. Both parents and spouses will sign that. This would have been useful in the event if it is discovered that a child marriage has occurred, then the dowry will be automatically forfeited and returned to the girl's parents. It will do two things. Firstly it will discourage dowry and secondly it will prevent child marriage. Another suggestion is that no legal punishment, but administered sanction against perpetrators. In China, any government official at any level who marries off his daughter under 18 is not entitled to promotion and loses their bonuses.

It would it be useful that number of people have to sign the marriage form that the girl is over 18, including the teacher and both parents. It would be helpful that if it is found that child marriage has been occurred then the registrar will lose his license. It would be helpful if community leaders would flag individually that they are against child marriage.

**Aminul Islam, Child Protection Specialist, Unicef**



I want to look at the child marriage issue from two different angles. One is the social norm; child marriage is a harmful practice. We are working with the

Ministry of Women and Children Affairs by organizing community clubs where people talk about these issues and adolescents can learn how to negotiate on these issues.

Another angle is enforcement of law. From the legal perspective, determination of age is very important. From UNICEF, we are helping the government to improve the situation of birth registration. It will be digitalized. Getting fake certificates will be difficult now. And very soon a circular is coming that from now on certificate has to be issued electronically. The other point is the use of birth certificates by the kazis. Digitalization would help the kazis to verify whether the birth certificate submitted to them is real or vague. Another point declaring the marriage illegal is very important. At present Child Marriage Restraint Act is not declaring the marriage illegal or void.

We have 14 to 16 community radio stations that can be an useful way of communication.

**Mamunur Rashid**

Around 10 to 12% of Bangladeshi population is from Hindu community. They do not have any system of marriage registration until last year. Still the system is an optional one but it should be made compulsory and that will also help decrease child marriage.

**Mahfuza Rahman, Project Officer - Education, UNESCO**



I would like to emphasize upon education building because in McGrath's presentation the first casualty of a child marriage was education. The modification of text books is

one thing but the other thing is the implementation issue. In Bangladesh, we have to make things mandatory to make it happen. In the primary education sector we can make it mandatory to talk with the community leaders about child marriage issue.

We cannot overburden the curriculum and the text books. Discussion should be arranged in the non-formal sector. This will also work for behavioral change.

**Sonya Soheli, Member, UNFPA Youth Forum for Reproductive Health**



I would like to talk about what we as youth can do. Charity begins at home like the saying goes; we can start education from home.

We can spread the message starting from our drivers, guards and maids that child marriage must not be practiced. We can take these steps forward using social networking. We can post articles, statuses and share it with our friends. So that they can also be able to update the current scenario and feel motivated to aware people who are at their surroundings.

**Jyoti Dringra**

I would like to take the point about safeties of girls because lack of it leads to marry the girls off at the earlier age. Safety net programmes could be very relevant. We could think of a safety net programme that starts at the birth of the girl. A social fund is established in her name, and if the girl is not married by the time of 18, the family gets certain amount of money.

**Michael McGrath**

Save the Children has been involved in a programme where cooking oil is provided as incentive to girls not to get married. The result of the study is still being processed. Till then we are a little bit confused about the efficiency and usefulness of the programme to give cooking oil to each girls who are not married. The concept is interesting from the sense that the unmarried girl till her 18 is being helpful for her family in a way.

**Arthur Erken**

It is clear that this topic generated a lot of anxiety and interest. There seems to be no disagreement on what causes child marriage. The social factors and economic factors are driving it to a large extent. As a first step, what we should do immediately is enforcing the law. Another low hanging fruit is introduction of a digitized birth registration system.

What is more harder to do is that how we can bring our communities together to create an environment in which child marriages are no longer happening. Multiple factors are influencing the decision within families to marry their daughters off at a young age. We need to make families and communities aware that, ultimately, child marriage benefits no one. I think that it is a real powerful message coming out of this roundtable.

The idea of establishing a social fund for girls is another very interesting idea that deserves further attention and study. Finally, it is important that we empower our adolescents. Why their decisions are taken on behalf them? We have already seen many cases whereby school-going youth have stopped their friend's marriage. This is the result of youth empowerment. We have to say to them that you can actually stop child marriage.

I thank you all for your presence and excellent contributions to this roundtable.