



Refusing marriage, choosing education

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

AROUND 20 young girls clap and sing in harmony under a large tin shed as neighbours cast curious looks. The chorus becomes louder as the girls sing a clear message: "Girls, don't get married before you are 18." These girls in Biprohalsha village in Natore District, some 200km northwest of Dhaka, are hosting one of their twice-monthly gatherings, part of a United Nations-supported adolescent empowerment project funded by the European Union and run by BRAC. One of their main subjects of discussion is child marriage.

The song has a particular resonance for Afroza Khatun, a 17-year-old college student who leads the group. Going against custom and community pressure, Afroza recently refused her marriage proposal, setting an example in her village by convincing her parents, neighbours and village leaders that she wanted to complete her studies before getting married.

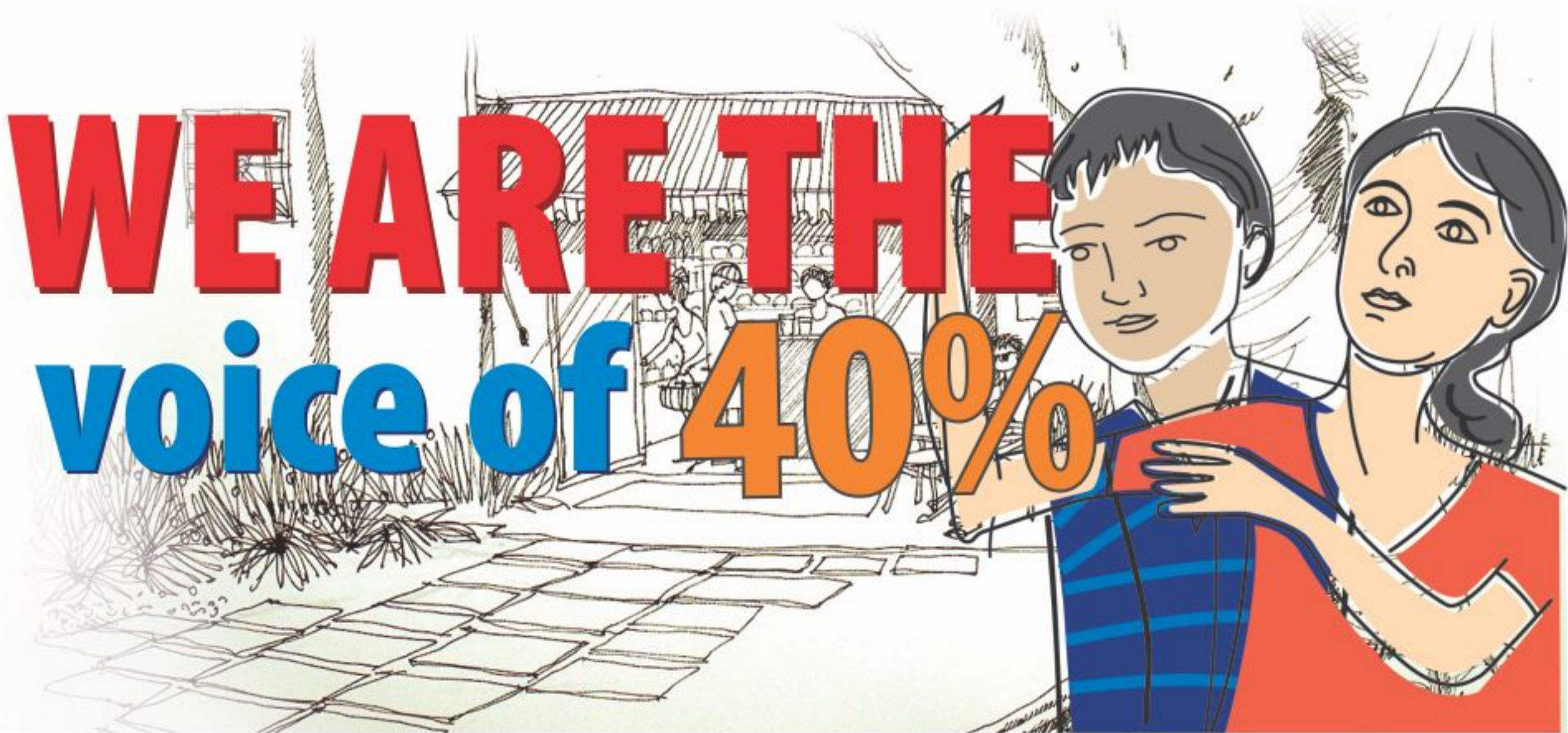
"Six months ago, a relative from an adjacent village came to see my father to propose my marriage with the owner of a small shop. A day later, I told my parents that I

wanted to complete my studies in college," said Afroza.

She and her friends from the adolescent group asked senior members of their community to help her convince her parents to oppose the marriage. The first person they went to was Sharathi Biswas, programme organiser of BRAC, who recalls: "I reminded Afroza's parents about our previous meetings in which they had agreed to respect teenage girls' rights and avoid early marriage." A local union council member, Md Hazrat Ali Mandol, also intervened on Afroza's behalf. As a council member, Mandol has considerable influence in the society, and he strongly supports girls waiting until they are at least 18 to get married. "I mediated when I heard that Afroza was getting married. It's a shame that people still consider young girls a burden on their families," said Mandol.

Afroza also had help from a local religious leader, Abdur Razzak, who said: "I had organized a meeting of senior members of the community to condemn those who agree to get their daughters married before the age of 18. In this case, I thought we could easily convince Afroza's father."

Afroza's father, Md Akram Hossain, recalls differently



UNFPA Message

Dear Readers,

It gives me great pleasure to inaugurate the first two-page monthly supplement in The Daily Star, dedicated to issues related to maternal health, family planning and gender equality in Bangladesh, sponsored jointly by The Daily Star and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Since young people between the ages of 10-30 years make up 40% of the population of Bangladesh, we want to specifically reach out to them with stories and information about the state of the Bangladesh population when it comes to population issues, to reproductive health and rights, to fertility and family planning, and to gender equality and the status of women and girls. The two-pages are not meant to just highlight the problems, but above all also what is being done in Bangladesh about them. Because a lot is being done in this country when it comes to improving maternal health, providing reproductive health information and services, addressing high fertility and the promotion of family planning, and gender equality.

We are interested in capturing real life stories of people, women and men, who have experienced the effects of ill reproductive health, of child marriages, of gender-based violence, of maternal deaths in their families, of high fertility, and to highlight how they have overcome or dealt with these issues. These pages will also be used for providing factual and correct information, for instance about reproductive health and family planning issues, about where to go in case of gender-based violence, about programmes and projects that have successfully addressed some of these issues.

I am extremely excited about teaming up with such a prestigious daily as The Daily Star to jointly publish this two-pages on a monthly basis. It shows the commitment of The Daily Star to use its name and reputation to educate the Bangladesh population about some of the most pressing issues of our time: population growth, maternal mortality, gender discrimination, and the protection of fundamental human rights.

I hope you will enjoy these pages.

Arthur Erken
UNFPA Representative



STAR ARCHIVE

A 'status' of mind

SHAYERA MOULA

FOR most of us, playing 'shangshar...shangshar,' assuming an imaginary position of a wife and mother (of pretty dolls), having plastic pots and pans along with other kitchen utilities, and setting out to make a home for ourselves with a family, was a make-belief game we enjoyed as early as we could remember. Young girls often mother their belongings, where young boys experiment with their toys and explore their outdoors. It is somewhat assumed in the nature of girls that she is best behaved when caring and being homely.

While a class of girls in Bangladesh upon getting older went ahead and got themselves an education and waited or waits another 15 - 20 years until they actually get married, from 2000 to 2010 alone, 32 out of every 100 from the not so privileged part of the country have already been pushed into actual marriage before they

when Europe was recovering from its damaged economy, "we [the Finish community] too were fighting for women emancipation, where her marital status alone should not dictate her social rights. We must remember that our grandmothers were also uneducated and married young in order to have social security and a financially equipped future."

The legal age for Bangladeshi girls to marry is said to be 18; and 21 for boys. But many of the girls are seen to be burdens on their families and are married off earlier with that similar hope for an overall security.

UN Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki Moon, on the first International Day of Girl Child (October 11, 2012) stated, "Child marriage divorces girls from opportunity and undermines their well-being." Mizan (not real name), a chauffeur and father of five -- three girls and two boys -- believes otherwise. "The eldest one [daughter] is 15, and

schools (UNICEF).

Let us not forget that 70 million women world-wide aged 20 - 24 have married before they reached 18 where 23 million married before 15. The issue is as much global as it is national.

Child marriage is also partly inclined to the cultural and religious history of the sub-continent. Traditionally many of the young girls were married off as an agreement and deal signed between two parties in order to keep their families within the same community and caste, therefore keeping the caste system alive in India.

In terms of Islam however, A. Faizur Rahman, secretary general of the Islamic Forum for the promotion of "Moderate Thought" explains in his article that under the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939, Muslim girls as they reach 15 become legally "informed and competent to enter into marital alliances on their own." The law states that any Muslim girl can refuse to accept her marriage before she is 18 given that she had already been married off by her father or other any other guardian before she turned 15. ("Islamic Law does not sanction child marriage" The Hindu, June 13, 2012)

The article however underlines the notion that many of the Muslim girls are actually married off early nonetheless, and although this may remain within the Muslim Law most either do not know about it or simply would not practice it.

"Age is not a factor," says Ruksana (not real name), a middle-aged and a part-time house help, "when the family and shomaj (society) decides we are ready to marry, we marry." The difference though is that in her own mother's time there was no dowry paid and even she did not have to think too much about the money she brings with her.

"Getting my 13 year old daughter married though has been a hassle because she works and is unwilling to marry. But the older she gets, the more I will have to pay for her." Ruksana has to pay at least Tk.20-30,000 cash along with other assets and jewelry if she marries her daughter off this year.

As we address this global concern, between 2011 and 2020 more than 140 million girls will have become child brides (UNFPA), where 14.2 million will marry annually and 39,000 will tie the knot as early as 8 years of age every day. This will block their education, draw a bar in their life skills, add more risks to their early pregnancies and will encounter sexual violence.

On top of everything else, there is also a high domestic control over their lives. According to a survey, 48% of Bangladeshi girls said that their husbands made all the medical decisions in their lives and 35% claimed that their husbands have full control over their social lives. Then how can we call this a respectful social "status" for our women and how is it considered the "well-being" of their lives? This socio-cultural phenomenon of child marriages is yet to be removed from our societies, as it clearly is a violation of fundamental human rights of our girl children.

THE WRITER IS SUB-EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR.



STAR ARCHIVE

reached 15; 66 out of every 100 married before 18.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy in his attempt to remove social evils had greatly campaigned against child marriage among other social issues that provoked the rights of women in 19th Century India. How is it then that after two hundred years, pockets of communities around India, Bangladesh and Pakistan are still fighting the issue? The status of a married girl/woman outruns all other statuses for her, even today, in the sub-continent -- her role as a wife and mother earns her a greater social position.

But failures in the fight against child marriage indicate that both the financial state of economy and the psychological state of our nation have successfully lead girls into getting married earlier. An anthropology student based in Finland acknowledges that right after the World Wars,

if she doesn't marry now, right after completing secondary school her future would look gloomy. Her dowry will be more, her husband would be older and the demands will increase." In other words, according to him her 'well-being' will be hampered.

While article 17 of the constitution states that primary education in Bangladesh shall be the responsibility of the state in the attempt to promote the education for all goal, there is a drastic drop in the number of girls that go to secondary school, Mizan's daughter being slightly lucky here, because most of the time the cause is that they are married off and cannot continue their education. In fact one third of teen girls (15 - 19) are pregnant before they reach 18 where only 45% of the girls enroll in secondary

Sebika comes back



My name is Sebika Borua. I am 25 years old. I am from Lama Upazilla, Cox's Bazar. I got married when I was just 15 years old. Soon after I got married, I became pregnant. I did not know anything about consulting a doctor at that time. When labour started, a village midwife came to help me with the delivery. But I had a lot of complications. So, I was shifted to MCH. My baby could not be saved, but because of the prolonged labour I was in, I had developed a fistula. The doctor proposed an operation, but my husband was not willing. So I remained uncared for. Returning home, I faced severe violence. In the meantime, I again became pregnant. My husband continued the inhuman torture. Luckily, I gave birth to a baby boy. But my husband didn't care for that. Later he divorced me with some compensation, because he does not want to live with a fistula patient. I have gone through three operations now and at last I got cured. I have suffered from this disease for 10 years. Now I am taking training of sewing from Moner Bari Shilpoghor, a local NGO. After completing my training I will get a loan. With the loan I will do some business on my own. Now I keenly look forward to live a peaceful, happier life with my son and on my own effort.



Sebika Borua

ENGENDERHEALTH