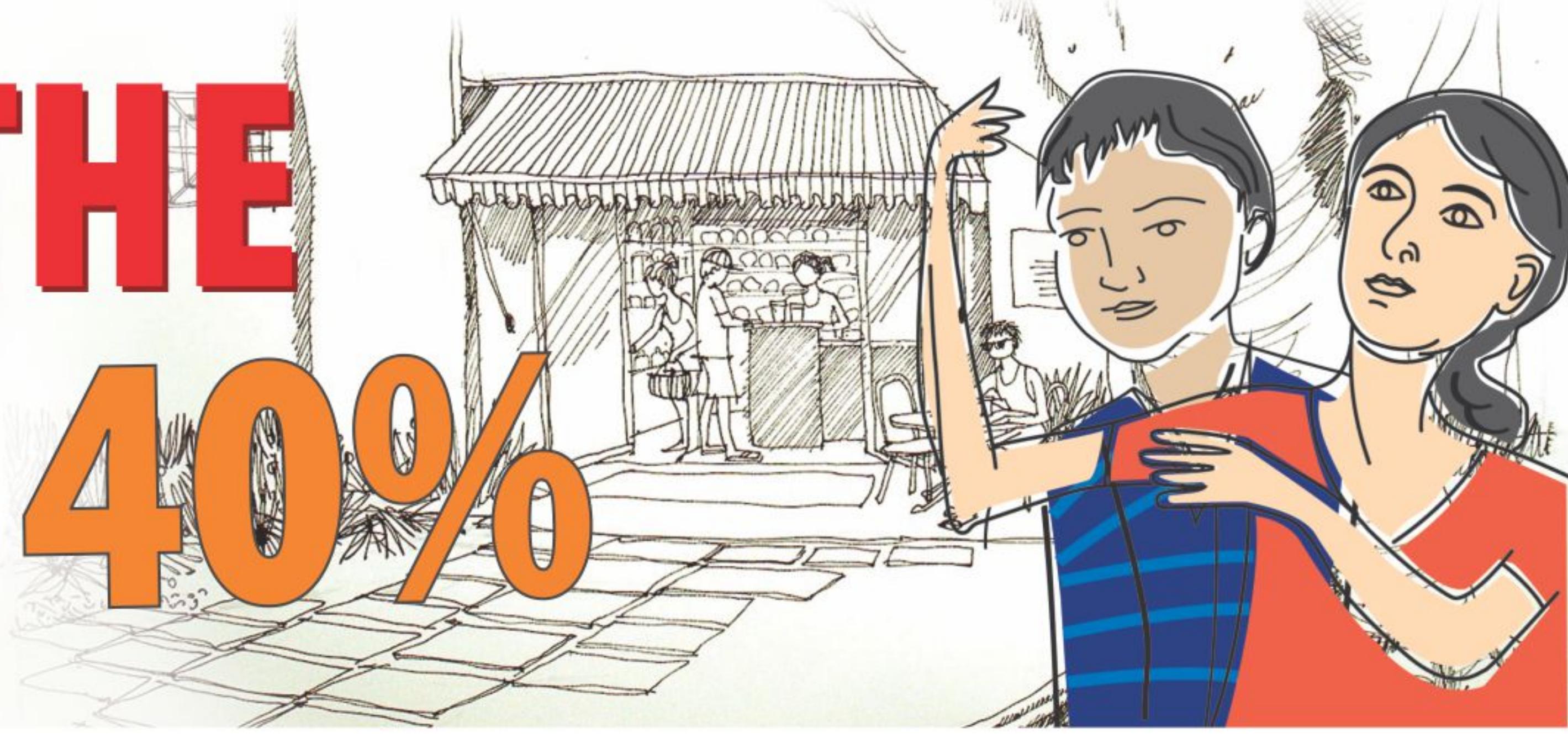


# WE ARE THE voice of 40%



RUBAYET HAMID

**B**ASED on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), "early marriage" refers to any marriage involving individuals under the age of 18 and is considered a severe human rights violation.

Although early marriage is a worldwide concern and a phenomenon existing globally, the rates vary substantially between countries. The ten countries with the highest rate of child marriage according to United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) are: Niger, 75%; Chad and Central African Republic, 68%; Bangladesh, 66%; Guinea, 63%; Mozambique, 56%; Mali, 55%; Burkina Faso and South Sudan, 52%; and Malawi, 50%.

However, in absolute numbers, due to its population size, India is believed to host the highest number of child marriages in the world although the rate is 47%. Nevertheless, the prevalence of child marriage is very high in Bangladesh, representing the highest percentage in South Asia and one of the highest globally. 53% of urban children are at risk, and the figure is even higher at 70% in rural areas.

According to one of the recent studies done by UNFPA, it was reported that worldwide, every day 39,000 child marriages are taking place. Given the current trend, it has been forecasted that between 2011 and 2020, more than 140 million girls will become child brides and the number of child brides under the age of 15 will reach about 50 million by 2020 and will cross 100 million by 2030.

The UNCRC that has been ratified in 1989, which Bangladesh signed on 3rd August 1990, is based on four major principles of (i) non-discrimination (ii) best interest of the child (iii) right to life, survival and development and (iv) right to participation. In any child marriage, all or most of these principles are violated in some form or the other.

Although boys sometimes are at risk of child marriage, it has been noted that girls are disproportionately affected and are more likely to be married off as children than boys; hence this represents discrimination.

In the context of Bangladesh, it is widely perceived that younger brides "cost" smaller dowries for their families. Some of the key reasons for child marriage are related to gender inequality, tradition and poverty. Young girls are often married off when poor families want to reduce the number of household members to feed, clothe and educate and often boys are chosen over girls. Sometimes, child marriage occurs because the respective culture demands so. In a study conducted in 2010, it was found that 71% of the parents forcing their children into early marriage were illiterate and not aware of its repercussions. Thus, poor households want their daughters married off as early as possible and in many cases are seen as a burden to the family. Often the girl's opinions are not taken into consideration, which violates the child's right to participation in the decision making process.

When married off at a very young age, girls are found to be at more risk of factors that could go against their best interest,



and their proper development/survival is impeded as well. High infant mortality rates, high morbidity rates and high maternal mortality rates are all directly proportional to early childbearing, which is caused by early marriage. Often, young girls married to older men are at a greater risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, as these men have a higher probability of being exposed to unprotected sex before marriage. Other health complications like emotional trauma, prolonged and obstructed labour, hemorrhaging, infection and obstetric fistula are quite common as well. Recent studies show that out of every 100,000 live births, 340 women die due to pregnancy-related causes and most of these women are under the age of 19; UNICEF figures on child marriage in South Asia state that girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die of pregnancy and childbirth complications than women between the ages of 20 and 24. Along with health risks, child brides are at a heightened risk of

violence at home as they are found to be less equipped to protect themselves. These children's rights are violated as they are deprived of formal and non-formal education, life skills and vocational trainings. This hampers their chances of getting into decent employment in the future, thus trapping these individuals in the vicious cycle of poverty, oppression and perceived dependency. Each of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and global targets to reduce poverty worldwide are undermined by child marriages.

In Bangladesh, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 passed during British rule is still applicable where the legal age for a girl to marry is 18. But high rates of child marriage prove that unfortunately, enforcement of the law is weak in the country. Other countries in Asia where the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 are India, Indonesia, Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka (for non-muslim girls). However, in countries like Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and

Pakistan (for Muslim girls), Sharia Law dominates where the minimum legal age for marriage is 15 and 16 respectively.

According to the above law mentioned, anyone who performs, conducts or directs any child marriage is punishable with simple imprisonment of maximum one month or a fine of one thousand taka or both. Clearly, such lenient penalties have been proved insufficient to deter such practices. Thus, it may be argued that stronger penalties with stricter enforcement may prove helpful to make the law more effective. ---

In Bangladesh, a national law was passed in 2004 which requires all births to be registered. This is believed to prove helpful determining a child's age while getting married. Experts believe that digitizing birth registration will prove more helpful, as manipulation of data can be avoided.

Awareness-raising campaigns, training workshops for law enforcement and myth busting, and formation of village watch-dog committees within the community may actively contribute to reducing child marriage as well. It is believed that significant changes can be derived if religious and community leaders, police, judiciary, teachers, village elders, members of local and national government and parents can be made aware of the negative repercussions of child marriage and become involved in programmes/projects in different tiers. It is also believed that providing economic incentives to the parents can help promote girls' education and reduce child marriage.

Taking Compulsory Primary Education (CPE) Act 1990 one step further by making secondary schooling mandatory can also prove effective. For ensuring girls' increased attendance, it is vital that schooling cost is subsidized, schools are more accessible in terms of distance and developed as safe places with proper sanitation facilities, number of teachers are increased and they are sensitized regarding dropout issues. Along with formal schooling, life skills training, vocational and livelihood skills training to equip girls for income generating activities can also prove helpful and reduce their perception of dependency in the long run.

According to studies conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), one of the most powerful tools for delaying child marriage has been increased economic opportunities for women. In Bangladesh, despite the challenges of low wages, long working hours and poor working conditions, the rise of the RMG sector and trade liberalization have proved helpful for delaying marriages for young women who have managed to work and save for the higher dowry demands associated with delayed marriage.

If some or all of the above recommendations can be implemented, it can certainly reduce the prevalence of child marriage in the country and make the government's efforts to achieve the MDGs real.

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## A way out

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**T**HE dynamics of economic independence for girls in rural Bangladesh is different from that in the urban part of the country. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BANBEIS), dropout rate for girls in secondary level education stands at 54%, which implies that 54% of all girls who were enrolled in class VI drop out by the time they are in class X. The dominant reason for the steep dropout rates is early marriage. In rural Bangladesh, dowry is an element that is intertwined in a girl's marriage. The older the girl gets, the more dowry is demanded for her as a means to compensate for her old age. As a result, parents are sometimes inclined to put their daughters' hands in marriages at a young age to escape the financial strain in the future. According to UNICEF, 66% of all girls are married off by the age of 18. After a girl is married, she seldom gets an opportunity to revert to being a student and attain further education. After marriage comes the responsibility of her husband and his family as well as rearing children in years to follow.

This can depict the economic and financial status of a married young girl especially in rural areas. If she is a housewife responsible for rearing children and taking care of her family, her economic stance in the eyes of the community is marginal at best. Her finances are constrained by her husband's will. If the husband provides her with money to bear the expenses of the family, her share may only be however little she can save after spending on all household needs. In some cases, husbands do not even financially support the wives and as a result she has to resort to taking out loans or doing odd jobs to sustain the family. This turns out to be an extremely arduous task for someone with little education and skills.

For women to be in control of their lives, they need to be financially and thus, economically independent. The basic policy starts with education. Though legally it is not allowed for a girl to get married unless she is 18 years old, adolescent marriages are rampant. Therefore, policy implementation must be strengthened to minimize, if not completely dissolve, the problem. When a girl finishes education, she is armored with human capital that she can use to get a respectable job and maintain herself and her family.

For girls who are married and for whom going back to education is not an option, technical and vocational training is advisable for them. In rural parts of the country, there are many young women who have gotten divorced soon after marriage. In these situations, these young women have no option but to take refuge to their parents' houses. The parents in most cases are not wealthy enough to bear the financial load of these women and, once again, they become financially and economically vulnerable.

Opening up accessible skills-training centers exclusively for women can help to financially rehabilitate these women. Moreover, if they are trained in those particular skills that are required in migrant worker-demanding countries, they can be sent abroad for work and this can in turn increase remittance inflow in the country.

As a result they will be able to sustain themselves, as well as their families and children.

## The story of Nahar

**N**AHAR (28-years) has become a role model to the community around her for standing up against gender-based violence (GBV). She is now a successful small entrepreneur in her locality. After getting training from the UNFPA-supported Women Support Centre, she was able to change her life. Now she is producing handicrafts and selling her products to the community. She is also sharing her experiences with them and encouraging people to stand up against gender based violence.

Nahar got married Jahangir Alam in 2002 according to Muslim law. Alam demanded Tk. 20,000.00 as dowry for furniture and other necessary things, which her parents agreed. Nahar is a gentle and hard-working woman and her poor parents gave dowry to her husband because they wanted Nahar to have a happy married life.

The new couple passed their married life happily for about a year. After that, her husband started demanding more dowry in cash or kind. When she failed to produce it, he would torture her both physically and mentally. Her husband also had suspicions about her character and used this to justify the physical and mental torture that increased day by day.

Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law both tortured her for household chores. Her husband and mother-in-law did not provide her with proper food and clothing either. Despite this adverse situation, Nahar wanted to continue her married life for her 2 daughters and their future. She tried her best to keep the family happy, but the intolerable torture was increasing every day.

Nahar's husband was continuously pushing her demanding more dowry. When she did not agree to give him more money or anything else, he beat her brutally and threw her out of the house.



In these helpless circumstances, Nahar came to know about the Women's Support Centre that provides support to the victim through a neighbor. She came to the UNFPA-supported Woman's Support Center (WSC) in January of 2013. After hearing her story, office authorities suggested that she stay in the shelter home in order to ensure her safety. After field investigations, WSC found this to be a Gender-Based Violence case.

WSC sent a notice to her husband and other perpetrators to force them to come meet for arbitration. During this period, psychosocial counseling was provided to Nahar for her mental strength. On October 6, 2013, a successful arbitration was held in WSC with the presence of senior members of both families to help solve their problems.

Nahar and her husband expressed their opinion to continue their family life with the following conditions demanded by Sabekun Nahar: Her husband, Jahangir Alam, would work regularly for earning; her husband would never torture her for any reason; and her husband would provide support for her and their children's livelihood.

Nahar's husband realized that his behavior had been unacceptable and agreed with all of the conditions. During her stay in the WSC shelter, Nahar completed her vocational training successfully on handicrafts.

Nahar returned to her home in a happy moment with her husband. With her new expertise in stitching clothes, she also started a small business, which her husband is supporting her in. Now Nahar is continuing her handicrafts business and contributing monetary support to the family along with her husband. The couple is maintaining communication with WSC and has become an example in their