

# Do not lower marriage age for girls

HRW asks govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government's attempt to lower the marriage age for girls from 18 to 16 raises serious doubts about the commitment of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to end child marriage, Human Rights Watch said yesterday.

The attempt is a step in the wrong direction as regards the prime minister's pledge, made last year, to end child marriage by 2041, it added.

"The government should act before another generation of girls is lost," said Heather Barr, HRW senior researcher on women's rights.

She was speaking at the launch of a report titled "Marry Before Your House is Swept Away: Child Marriage in Bangladesh" at the Jatiya Press Club.

The Bangladesh government is yet to take sufficient steps to end child marriage in line with its earlier promises, she observed.

"Bangladesh has the highest rate of child marriage of girls under the age of 15 in the world, with 29 percent of girls are married before they reach 15, according to a UNICEF study. Two percent of girls are married before 11," Barr told the programme.

The report is based on more than 100 interviews, mostly with married girls, conducted in different districts. It primarily focuses on the factors that lead to child marriage.

Poverty, natural disaster, lack of access to education, social pressure, harassment, and dowry were cited as the main driving factors behind child marriage.

The HRW study also documented the consequences of child marriage, including serious health impacts of early pregnancy, discontinuation of secondary education, abandonment, and facing domestic violence from spouses and in-laws.

"Interviewees consistently described local government officials issuing forged birth certificates, showing girls' ages as over 18, in return for bribes of as little as \$1.30.

Even when marriages are prevented by local officials, as they sometimes are, families find it easy to hold the marriage in a different jurisdiction," the report noted.

"Parents who are unable to feed their children or pay for their education costs may seek a husband for their daughters simply so that the girls can eat."

Many poor girls don't have access to education because their families cannot afford exam fees, uniforms, stationery, and other associated costs even though education is "free" for women in Bangladesh (up to higher secondary level), pointed out the rights watchdog.

Natural disasters in Bangladesh have been another reason for child marriage. "Bangladesh is among the countries in the world most affected by natural disasters and climate change; many families are pushed by disasters into deepening poverty, which increases the risk that their daughters would be married as children," read the report.

The HRW recommended the government reform the Child Marriage Restraint Act by this year, by setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 for men and women with no exceptions. The government should expand measures to end child marriage and provide assistance to married children and adults who were married as children.

Bede Sheppard, deputy director of children's rights division at the HRW; and Annerieke Smaak, associate of women's rights division, were present.

The women and children affairs ministry last year prepared a draft of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2014 and sent it to the law ministry for vetting, according to media reports.

A provision of the proposed act says though the marriage age for girls would be 18, the marriage of a girl aged 16 would not be regarded as illegal if it was done with the consent of her parents or a court for valid reasons.



Media can play an important role in changing perceptions of gender-based violence in Bangladesh, say speakers at a roundtable at The Daily Star Centre in Dhaka on Tuesday.

PHOTO: STAR

## Media can play big role

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O'Connor shared how she had faced sexual harassment in the 1970s and 80s while working as a journalist, but didn't get any support from the management.

However, things began to change in early 90s after the media extensively covered a law professor's sexual harassment complaint against a Supreme Court justice nominee, she said.

"In newsrooms across the country, conversations took place about the fact that newsrooms themselves, as I said, were complicit in this activity."

She recounted how media activism encouraged more women to speak up and report sexual harassment.

Yesterday's roundtable was organised jointly by Protecting Human Rights Program (PHR) and Women Journalists' Network of Bangladesh. PHR is a five-year domestic violence prevention and protection initiative funded by the USAID.

PHR is being implemented by Plan Bangladesh in partnership with Bangladesh National Women Lawyer's Association and 11 local NGOs in 102 unions of six districts.

In his keynote speech, Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said one of the main reasons for gender-based and sexual

violence was undervaluing the role of women in society and in economy.

He noted that the country's media failed persistently to grasp the importance of the issue and recognise the role of women.

"Media should be much more conscientious in keeping the society accountable, and holding law enforcement agencies accountable for implementation of the law."

Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, editor-in-chief and CEO of Boishakhi Television, wondered how many media houses were aware of the 2009 High Court Guidelines on sexual harassment.

Only a few media houses complied with the guidelines and formed complaint committees. Media houses should educate themselves before proceeding to teach others, and be careful about the portrayal of an incident, victims and perpetrators of sexual violence, he said.

News reports should include community experts' opinions on prevention of such crimes and also community responses to it, he said.

Farida Yasmin, senior journalist of Bangla daily Ittefaq, said political news always got priority over women's issues in male-dominated newsrooms.

Gitara Nasreen, professor of mass communications and journalism department at Dhaka University, stressed the need for sensitivity training for journalists, and suggested that more women should be there at policy-making level in media houses.

Khushi Kabir, coordinator of Nijera Kori, said the concept of masculinity should be deconstructed.

"Men should be taught to become human beings and not just men so that they can respect another human being," she said.

Abul Hossain, project director of Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women, said 25,000 women sought help at one stop crisis centres across the country in the last 15 years, and one-third of them rape victims. Of the rapists, only 0.0045 percent was punished.

"Many women withdraw cases because of the lengthy process and lack of evidence," said the project director of the programme of women and children's affairs ministry.

He said it was important to preserve evidence, and maintain forensic and DNA laboratories across the country.

Hamida Hossain of Ain o Salish Kendra put emphasis on investigative and follow-up reports.

## 'Making things normal'

Economist on Modi's Dhaka visit

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will do whatever it takes to ensure that the 50th anniversary of independence is presided over by followers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, The Economist wrote on Monday.

"The sense in the capital is that Sheikh Hasina will do whatever it takes to ensure that the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence, in 2021, is presided over by the right people: in other words, those who revere her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first president of Bangladesh," the magazine said in a report.

The report titled "Bangladesh and India: Making things normal" focused on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's June 6-7 visit to Bangladesh.

It said the "most startling" feature of Modi's visit was the "tame conduct" of the BNP. "Out of power since 2006, now out of ideas and running out of manpower, the BNP has never looked weaker."

The London-based weekly also wrote, "Modi came bearing Bangladesh a gift half the size of Hong Kong island: 40 square kilometers of territory, along the two countries' shared border."

Back in Delhi, explaining the significance of the revived border agreement to reporters, Modi compared it to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the magazine mentioned.

The report termed the Berlin Wall analogy "overstated and unflattering", saying India and Bangladesh were hardly at war.

It added, "Indian troops, however, have been shooting unlucky cattle smugglers and migrant workers at a horrific rate."

"In the first five months of 2015 Indian border forces have killed 20 Bangladeshis. If Mr Modi's overture could end that bloodshed, it would be a great thing."

## Ministries seeking extra fund slammed

Supplementary budget passed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Senior Awami League leader Suranjit Sengupta last night came down heavily on different ministries for seeking additional budgetary allocations for fiscal year 2014-15 without giving any explanation.

Taking part in the discussion on the supplementary budget for FY 2014-15, the AL leader also blasted the ministries that failed to spend their allocated money.

A number of opposition and independent MPs also lambasted the government for not providing any document in favour of additional allocations for ministries.

The House, however, passed the supplementary budget of more than Tk 9,508.57 crore.

In his speech, Suranjit said the process of passing the supplementary budget is faulty. "The reasons behind the extra expenditure remained unknown. The ministries and divisions were not required to justify the additional expenditure. And the House could not know whether they were justified."

State Minister for Finance Abdul Mannan, who placed the related bill in parliament in absence of Finance Minister AMA Muhith, said details on the additional allocation were mentioned during placing of budget for FY 2015-16 in parliament on June 4.

## BNP blames govt for Teesta failure

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP yesterday said it was a "government failure" that the Teesta water-sharing agreement was not signed during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Dhaka.

"The people of Bangladesh as well as the BNP got frustrated as the Teesta deal was not signed," party spokesperson Asaduzzaman Ripon told a press briefing at the party's Nayapaltn headquarters in the capital yesterday.

Asked how the BNP sees the success of the visit, Ripon, also the party's international affairs secretary, said, "The question cannot be answered in a single sentence as it may create confusions."

"Before making any comment [on the issue], we will have to go through the agreements and memorandums of understanding which have been inked. But the government is yet to disclose those."

He also urged the government to make public all the deals and MoUs signed between Bangladesh and India during Modi's visit to Dhaka.

## Trafficking through Nepal surfaced

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at his Uttar Mangal home the day before, after going off the grid for about three years.

It was not before 14 days had passed police took Faruque on remand only for a day to question him, even though human trafficking had become a global issue since early May.

Faruque had 14 of his 52 victims intruded into Nepal through India, without passport since 2012, according to victims and their relatives.

He got Nepalese passport for two of them -- Alamgir and Shahabuddin -- and sent them to Saudi Arabia as Nepalese citizens for working in a steel mill for Tk 15,000 a month.

The other 12 victims could not make it out of Nepal, where they were confined to a house in an unknown location, said two of the victims -- Suman and Abdul Khaleque -- who have managed to escape and come home.

The remaining 38 victims could not have their journey, though they all paid Faruque.

After his arrest, Faruk claimed that he had sent four people abroad taking Tk 3.65 lakh from each, police sources said.

Faruque and his father Selim Munshi lured all 52 victims. Selim's role was getting people and then taking them to Dhaka. They were handed over to a man in the capital who in turn took them to another man across the Hili border in Dinajpur.

The victims were then taken directly to Nepal, the sources said.

Faruque joined a trafficking gang after returning from Malaysia in 2011. He lived in Malaysia for three years.

Suman, who managed to escape, told The Daily Star that Faruque married a Nepalese woman -- Jhumpa -- who is also a part of the gang.

"She [Jhumpa] teaches victims Nepalese as it makes it easier to get a Nepalese passport," said Suman.

Suman and Khaleque returned home in February this year. They each had paid Faruque Tk 5 lakh.

It takes three months to a year to get a Nepalese passport, Suman claimed. He used the word "miserable" in describing his life in the house guarded by Nepalese men.

Victim Shahabuddin travelled to Saudi Arabia as a Nepalese citizen in 2014. He had sold 1.8 acres of land to pay Tk 8 lakh to Faruque to go to

Singapore. He is on the run in the kingdom as the police were after him for intruding into the country, his wife said.

Alamgir, working at a steel mill factory in Saudi Arabia, had paid Faruque Tk 4 lakh in 2013, his family said.

Alamgir's brother Atahar said, "Faruque wanted another Tk 3 lakh if we wanted our brother to move to Singapore from Saudi Arabia."

Atahar paid Faruque the Tk 3 lakh selling 50 decimal of land.

Another victim Abdur Rob told The Daily Star that he had paid Faruque Tk 8 lakh in phases since 2012. He had undergone medical tests thrice for going to Singapore, Malaysia, and Libya. His is still waiting his turn to go.

Relatives of the victims don't know how to deal with Faruque. They are torn between worries over the safety of their loved ones, getting their money back and punishment for Faruque.

Faruque gave the victims and their family members a reason to be afraid of. In one afternoon, during Suman's confinement in Nepal, Faruque went to see the victims with a glass filled with the blood of a

slaughtered goat.

"Blood keeps me healthy. I would like to drink your blood too," Suman quoted Faruque as saying.

Programme Officer of International Organisation for Migration in Bangladesh Asif Munier said though it is hard to determine the numbers of people like Faruque, their presence is evident in the numbers of trafficking victims.

"People like Faruque live among us and spread their networks across the country and obviously they have links with international human trafficking syndicates," said Asif.

On May 30, Rapid Action Battalion claimed to have arrested three human traffickers, who coerced fortune seekers to work in paint factories in India's Chennai and Tamilnadu.

On May 6, Rab arrested two traffickers -- Mujibur Rahman and Faisal-ur-Rashid -- at Khulna. Eleven victims attended the press briefing Rab organised afterwards. According to the victims, 26 victims were confined to a house for 20 days in a remote Nepalese village. They were released after families paid between Tk 14 lakh and Tk 20 lakh ransom.

## WB ready with \$1b funding

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They added the WB would finance around \$1 billion in the next two fiscal years and talks were at final stage about two projects involving around \$400 million.

The WB usually provides loan at 0.75 percent interest rate.

At a shipping secretary-level meeting between Bangladesh and India in New Delhi in April, India informed Bangladesh that the WB would provide one-third of the fund for developing water routes for transit of goods, and India and Bangladesh the rest.

During the just-concluded visit of Indian PM Narendra Modi to Bangladesh, several agreements related to transit have been signed. Under the deals, India can use Chittagong and Mongla ports. Several river routes have been identified for multimodal transport.

On Monday, the cabinet approved the draft of Motor Vehicle Agreement among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and

Nepal. Once signed, the deal will allow vehicles to ply designated routes in the four countries.

For the first phase of the Bangladesh Regional Connectivity Project and the Dhaka-Chittagong Inland Waterways Project, the WB has proposed to provide \$400 million in the upcoming fiscal year.

Of the sum, \$120 million will go to the connectivity project to facilitate trade and transport. It will cut border crossing time at selected border points.

Under the project, the infrastructure, warehousing facilities, transshipment and inspection system, customs control procedure, institutional and regulatory framework would be developed to facilitate smooth functioning of the ports.

New trade routes between Bangladesh and India are being opened in Mizoram and Tripura.

Under the proposed WB-funded project, five land ports have been identified for modernisation for boosting

trade of Bangladesh with India. Under this, new land ports will be established at Tegamukh in Rangamati and Ramgarh in Khagrachhari. The project will also develop land ports in Nepal and Bhutan.

One of the components of the project is to further modernise Chittagong Port to increase its capacity.

The modernisation is aimed at smooth clearance of goods at the ports, improving the procedures, infrastructure and systems. Necessary facilities will have to be ensured at the ports so that female traders can participate in cross border trade with ease, according to the aid memoir.

Of the first phase loan, \$280 million will go to the Dhaka-Chittagong Inland Waterways Project aimed at increasing efficiency and reliability of land water transport along the Dhaka-Chittagong corridor.

Under the project, the waterways will be made deeper through dredging to ensure easy transport of transit

goods as well as local goods through river routes. It will also develop rail links to connect them with regional corridors.

The second phase of the WB's proposed Bangladesh Regional Connectivity Project will finance investments at Chittagong Port in 2016-17. It also aims to improve inland waterways along the Bangladesh-India bilateral protocol route and inland water transport connectivity to Mizoram of India and two other key trading points.

The WB has designed the India Mizoram Roads II Regional Connectivity project to increase transport connectivity along regional trade corridors in the Indian state.

With road transport being the only mode of transport within the state, improvements to the network will reduce freight and passenger transport costs and provide quick and safer access to all parts of Mizoram and to neighbouring states and countries

such as Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The WB does not only stand ready to finance the project to make the inter-regional connectivity a reality in order to boost growth and lift millions of people out of poverty. It has also come up with grants.

Already, the lender has given a grant of \$5 million to study how to improve connectivity-related infrastructures. It will also provide technical assistance on management of ports, land ports, and inland water transport.

On invitation from the WB, two teams from Bangladesh and India toured Sweden, Norway and Switzerland last year to share lessons and best practices in transit framework, trade facilitation and logistic services.

Cross-border connectivity makes commercial sense too, as each hour's delay in border entails an additional cost of \$10-15 and a single day's delay in border raises the tariff on goods by 1 percent, according to the WB.