

Ending Child Marriage Building the evidence base

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REKHA (not her real name), who lives in the Rangpur Division of Bangladesh, got married when she was just 13 years old – “just after my first menstruation”, as she recalls. A year later the 14-year-old had a child of her own, joining the ranks of the thousands upon thousands of adolescent mothers in a country where child marriage remains widespread, even though the legal age of marriage is 18 for females and 21 for males.

Rekha's story is far from unusual. Almost one in two girls in South Asia – in countries including Bangladesh, India and Nepal – will marry before turning 18, and one in six will marry before the age of 15, if current rates continue. While the practice of child marriage has declined in South Asia over time, it nevertheless remains far too high. Child marriage is a practice that primarily affects girls but boys too. While a much smaller number of boys are married as children, there are also child grooms in the region, who marry even younger child brides.

For literally millions of girls like Rekha, child marriage violates their human rights. It threatens their lives and health, as well as their future prospects, exposing them to early pregnancy, and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Child marriage, quite simply, robs them of their future.

As the evidence shows, girls who marry young often become pregnant while they are still adolescents, putting them at risk of complications in pregnancy or childbirth – complications that are a leading cause of death among older adolescents in developing countries.

They are also more likely to experience violence, including sexual violence, than girls who marry over the age of 18, and to be more exposed to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV.

When they marry, girls are often forced to drop out of school so they can assume household responsibilities, denying their right to complete their education.



PHOTO: MH KAWSAR

Child marriage limits their opportunities including their job prospects, and has long term effects on their families.

It also has negative impacts on their children. A recent global study in five middle-income countries shows that children born to mothers 19 years or younger have a 20-30 percent increased risk of low birth weight and pre-term birth compared to mothers aged 20-24 years. Moreover, they have a 30-40 percent increased risk of stunting and failure to complete secondary schooling.

While many countries in South Asia have laws in place to prevent child marriage, the practice persists. Often, at the state and community level, traditional and customary laws still allow girls younger than 18 to marry with the consent of parents and other authorities. Unequal power relations between men and women, women's and girls' restricted rights and opportunities, and norms which place a

higher value on sons than daughters reinforce the practice. And, not surprisingly, vulnerability to child marriage increases during crises when family and social structures are disrupted – for example when families are separated during natural disasters or conflicts, or when they are faced with economic hardships that prompt parents to marry off their underage daughters.

Countries around the world have committed to “Eliminate all harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation” in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that underpin the 2030 Agenda whose central pledge is to leave no one behind.

UNFPA and UNICEF are working together to end child marriage through a multi-country initiative to prevent children, from marrying too young, and support those already married. In partnership with governments in South Asia, we are implementing proven

strategies for change: keeping children – especially girls – in school, increasing their access to health care, educating their parents and communities, increasing economic support to families, and putting in place and enforcing legislation. Just this week, our agencies are hosting a meeting of experts from South Asia and around the world to share and build the evidence base for change.

Strong partnerships at all levels are required to end child marriage. The scale of the problem requires all of us – governments, local actors, the global community and the United Nations – to act together to end child marriage. All of us need to join hands to give back to children, particularly girls like Rekha, their choices, their dreams, their futures – and their childhoods.

The writers are Asia-Pacific Regional Director, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and South Asia Regional Director, United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), respectively.

Stopping question paper leaks

New measures can be effective

WE welcome the health ministry's appointment of an independent expert to administer this year's medical admission test and its decision to introduce digital tracking devices to fend off question paper leak. Leaking of question papers can do immeasurable damage to the country. First, it allows individuals lacking proper qualifications to enter the medical profession, literally endangering people's lives. Second, it sets the wheels of corruption in motion and, most importantly, denies those with merit the chance to enter the medical profession and provide good health services to citizens. After widespread allegations of leaks last year especially, it is encouraging to see the authorities finally attempting to stop the menace with more vigour.

The fact that the entire admission process this year, starting from preparing the question papers, printing and distributing them to students' and others, will be under the supervision of a moderator appointed by the ministry, as per the recommendation of a special committee, is heartening. The committee includes journalists, medical educationists, information technologists and representatives of Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council and Bangladesh Medical Association. Moreover, tracking devices will allow the authorities to centrally locate transports moving the question papers, reducing chances of them falling into the wrong hands.

But while all these measures sound good on paper, without a change in people's tendency to resort to corruption, which in particular allowed for leaks in the past; ways to circumvent even the most sophisticated system can always be found. We hope the authorities do not allow laxity to set in again but continues to intensely pursue an end to the menace.

Future food security

Tackle multi-faceted challenges

THOUGH the country is self sufficient in feeding its 160 million strong population, we cannot remain complacent to the fact that the national population is slated to keep growing to 220 million before it stabilises. Feeding such a huge population with limited agricultural lands and water resources poses daunting challenges for policymakers. These and other issues were discussed by policy planners, domestic and international agro-experts at the Krishibid Institution Bangladesh's Fifth National Convention and International Agriculture Conference 2016.

Future agriculture production remains prone to changing climatic conditions that make water for irrigation a problem area. The incessant encroachment of realtors and industry on farmlands continues in the absence of any laws that prohibit the conversion of such land for non-farm activities. The environmental changes include the erosion of topsoil as brick kilns in the land continue to consume vast quantities of it annually that effectively render farmlands useless for years.

We are faced with an ageing farming populace as younger people tend to choose other professions and productivity cannot be increased as land ownership remains fragmented and small in size. The need to introduce new varieties of crops like saline-resistant and vitamin-enriched and crops has become more imperative than ever, particularly in the southern belt where high salinity of farmlands have rendered entire districts unfit for cultivation. Although we have done enough to ensure food security for the present, much remains to be done to keep this success for future generational food needs.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka North City Corporation offices need reform

Dhaka North City Corporation's office at Kawran Bazaar, particularly the revenue collection sections discharging or delivering service to tax payers, is in dire need of improvement.

The rooms and furniture are overcrowded, dilapidated and there is no proper ventilation or sufficient seating space. This is the environment in which our officials are trying to efficiently calculate Holding Tax, fill forms and receive cash from the rushing crowd of taxpayers.

I request the concerned authorities of Dhaka City North to provide basic comforts to both the visiting taxpayers and the people working there. Please ease the seating arrangement and help the place look more like an office.

Sirajul Islam

On email

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

One of the most hotly contested and far reaching outcomes of the Paris Agreement agreed last December was the inclusion of the long term warming limit of 1.5C above pre-industrial levels.

Going into that summit on the 30 November 2015 there were only around a hundred of the most vulnerable countries from small island states, Least Developed Countries (LDC) and Africa Groups who supported the inclusion of the goal.

None of the developed countries and also none of the larger developing countries such as China or India supported the inclusion.

Over the following twelve days, by effective diplomacy of the vulnerable countries groups, the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) under the leadership of the Philippines and the High Ambition Coalition led by Marshall Islands and USA along with strong support from civil society groups every single country was persuaded to include it in the agreement.

THE tougher temperature goal was a great victory for the vulnerable countries in terms of global diplomacy and advocacy. Now comes the hard part of implementation.

That was a great victory for the vulnerable countries in terms of global diplomacy and advocacy. However, now comes the hard part of implementing that agreement.

There are many voices challenging the possibility of keeping below 1.5C given

feasibility of keeping below 1.5C.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), at the request of the UNFCCC, has agreed to prepare a Special Report on 1.5C to be published in 2018 in time to inform the Global Stock Take that year.



PHOTO: AFP

that we are already above 1C from pre-industrial levels.

The next battle will now take place in the scientific community to determine the

The initial scoping meeting for that Special Report was held in Geneva last month and the outline for the report was developed for approval by the IPCC

Plenary meeting in October in Bangkok.

In order for the IPCC Special Report on 1.5C to have sufficient peer reviewed scientific literature for an effective assessment it is important for the scientific community, both natural as well as social sciences, to carry out relevant research and publish in time for the IPCC to cite their articles.

The conference on 1.5C: Meeting the Challenge of the Paris Agreement held in Oxford this week has brought together natural and social scientists from around the world to highlight this need to generate scientific evidence on the potential to actually reach the 1.5C target.

We know it is still possible to limit warming to safe levels – that is abundantly clear from presentations at this week's event.

But the bottom line on whether or not the world is able to keep below the 1.5C level depends on political will from the leaders of governments to take necessary actions but even more on the willingness of the ordinary people in every country to push their leaders to do the right things.

Even though keeping global temperature below 1.5C may be extremely difficult, it still remains possible if the needed actions are taken by leaders and supported by people around the world.

Humanity will have to show whether we are up to the challenge.

The writer is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University of Bangladesh.

A plea to the VC

Wrong side driving by University of Dhaka (DU) buses

Dear Sir,

Please accept my heart-felt respect! I presume that you have already received a couple of my letters before regarding the above subject. I am once again sending this letter as a last approach to stop wrong side driving by your university buses. I have been trying hard for more three years to convince you that it is utterly illegal to allow the DU buses to drive on the wrong sides of the roads, but all my approaches have gone in vain. So far there has been no respite in breaking the traffic rules by the DU buses. Rather DU buses have created an exemplary instance for others, and buses from universities like Jagannath University and

Jahangirnagar University have started driving on the wrong side.

I felt compelled to write to you three years ago as I was about to be hit by one of the DU buses even though I was on the right side of the street. As I approached a high official of police there, he expressed his helplessness altogether. He advised me to write to you (the VC) and seek your help in stopping the wrong side driving. Consequently, I wrote to you and sent copies to relevant police officials, but to no avail. Interestingly, a high official of the traffic department called me and also expressed his helplessness in controlling DU buses plying on the wrong side. I was surprised: how could the police department

say that they are helpless in front of the students of University of Dhaka! Does it mean that state itself is helpless?

At present, an increasing number of buses of University of Dhaka, Jagannath University and Jahangirnagar University have taken to driving illegally on the wrong side as a regular practice for their convenience in reaching their campuses. But this cannot, should not, and must not go on forever. The law of the land should be abided by all the citizens of the state. If your students break the law every day, then they will be least bothered about respecting laws in future – meaning the future generation will be distorted. When a student starts his/her day with breaking law, what future do you expect

from them? *The Daily Star* has already run reports on the DU buses and other vehicle driving on the wrong side.

Unfortunately while going to school, my son sees this wrong side driving by the university students as a regular practice and sadly smiles at me looking at my gloomy face. Your students make me feel shocked everyday. I have travelled to many countries, including SAARC ones, and nowhere have I found such wrong side driving by student buses.

You being Vice Chancellor of the University of Dhaka, may I implore you to take immediate steps to stop wrong side driving by your buses. At the same time may I request you to discuss this issue with the VCs of

other universities whose buses are also breaking the traffic rules following example set by DU. I am sending a copy of this letter to the VCs of those universities. Please take action jointly.

I eagerly await you ensuring a stop to university buses breaking traffic rules on the roads of Dhaka. Please make our roads safe and secure by ensuring traffic rules in place.

Kindest regards.

Shazzad Khan

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