

# Ending child marriage is good economics

ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

RECENTLY, I came across a news report that is quite shocking and concerning. A UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) study reveals that 59 percent of the marriages that took place in Bangladesh between 2006 and 2017 involved brides below the age of 18. The rate is the highest in South Asia and the fourth highest in the world behind Niger, Central African Republic and Chad. The data also suggests that child marriage is a major obstacle for Bangladesh to achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030. Therefore, understanding the causes and effects of child marriage and how to tackle it can help, not only to end the daily suffering of adolescent girls and the continual violation of their human rights, but can also help achieve multiple development goals.

Child marriage is a complex phenomenon related to various socio-economic factors, and is deeply rooted in existing cultural and religious traditions and poverty. Although Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in reducing poverty, almost 1 in 4 Bangladeshis (24.3 percent of the population) still live in poverty and 12.9 percent of the population in extreme poverty. Poverty plays a huge role in child marriage. According to a Human Rights Watch report, "global data shows that girls from the poorest 20 percent of families are twice as likely to marry before 18 as girls whose families are among the richest 20 percent." Several studies found that in Bangladesh, many poor parents who are unable to feed their children, or pay for their education costs seek a husband for their daughters as a survival strategy. Even though education (primary, secondary) is free, many families are unable to afford fees for exams, uniforms, stationery and other associated costs. And as a consequence, their girls lack access to education and end up in early marriages.

Unicef's latest report shows



Protestors form a human chain in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka to protest against child marriage.

PHOTO: AFP

environmental disasters linked to climate change are threatening the lives of over 19 million children in Bangladesh—including prompting many families to push their daughters into early marriages. The other factors driving child marriage in Bangladesh includes cultural and religious traditions, lack of access to education, social pressure, harassment, dowry and insecurity. Our society still thinks girls are weak and incapable to work and earn an income and often consider them an economic burden. Many girls themselves internalise the belief that they are simply a burden to their families and therefore want to get married young to help relieve their families.

Then there is the fear of harassment which often leads to abuse and rape. According to police reports, last year there were 16,253 incidents of violence against women and children. In our society, if a girl has been raped or sexually abused in any way, it decreases her chances of getting married in

the future. So many parents simply take their daughters out of school to protect them from abuse and ensure their viability as brides in the future. Demand for dowry also encourages child marriage because younger brides typically require smaller dowries. And failure to meet the demand of dowry often results in violence against the bride, after marriage.

Experts opine that the economic cost of child marriage is high and clearly contributes to poverty and has a large negative effect on economic growth. The process of economic development is complex and multidimensional, with vulnerabilities in some areas affecting other parts, and child marriage is a perfect example of this. Different studies show that the economic impacts and associated costs of child marriage are large and far-reaching, since it affects girls' health, nutrition, labour force participation, and their children and communities as well.

When forced to marry at a young

age, many girls drop out of school without completing their education and thus lose the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for formal employment. Lack of education disempowers women and they remain dependent on men and others throughout their life. Earning money becomes the sole responsibility of the men of the family and as a consequence, the nation remains deprived of the financial contributions of women which perpetuates the cycle of poverty and thereby curtails overall economic growth. Since mothers with little or no education are unaware of the benefits of education, they are less likely to keep their own children in school. The discontinuation of education that results from child marriage puts a huge dent to the political and socio-economic development of the country.

Child brides, even if they are not physically or emotionally ready, are often expected to bear children soon after marriage—which not only

exposes a young girl to profound health risks from early pregnancy, but is considered one of the leading causes of higher maternal and infant mortality. According to UNICEF estimates, a third of the girls aged between 15 and 19 are mothers or are pregnant.

Teenage mothers are twice as likely to die during childbirth and babies born to mothers under 14 are 50 percent more likely to die than those born to mothers aged over 20. Young brides not only bear children earlier, but have more children over their lifetime than women who marry after the age of 18. According to a research report titled, "The Economic Impacts of Child Marriage", conducted jointly by The World Bank and The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), early marriages contribute to high population growth, thereby threatening access of households to the often scarce resources they need to thrive on—putting pressure on government budgets to deliver quality services. To prevent child marriage, we

Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017 allows parents to marry off their children earlier by obtaining a court order.

Many human rights activists claim that such a provision to the law would not only encourage child marriage, but technically make child marriages legal. In our country, almost 95 percent of child marriages take place in the rural areas, where education is limited.

Lack of education is one of the most influential factors behind gender subjugation and, consequently, women's economic alienation. Education is the key for everyone, especially girls. Different studies show that girls with no education are over three times more likely to be married off before the age of 18 than those with secondary or higher education. Therefore, delaying the age of marriage and investing in girl's future by giving them an opportunity to build skills and knowledge, and by scrapping the special provision in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 can reduce child marriage.

Also, we need to involve families, communities and different social organisations to raise awareness about the harmful consequences of child marriage to change societal attitudes and reduce the acceptance among those who make the decision to marry off minor girls. We need to understand that exclusion of 50 percent of the population (women) from both the workplace and the market remains the greatest barrier to accelerating economic development.

For comprehensive economic development and poverty alleviation, economic participation of women and their integration into the national workforce is a must. And therefore, empowering their participation in the workforce is essential not only for reducing poverty and economic growth, but also for achieving social justice. Ending child marriage and ensuring that girls go to school is where it can all begin.

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need to take some effective social and political measures.

As per Bangladesh's law, the minimum age for marriage for men and women are 21 and 18 respectively. However, a special provision in the

# Mask-culinity: A toxic façade

An attempt to deconstruct toxic masculinity

MUHAMMAD RAKIBUL ISLAM

TOXIC masculinity is the practice of associating manhood with aggression, sex and status—a world where strength reigns supreme and emotions are deemed as weakness.

"Toxic Masculinity"—an expression, once associated with women's and gender studies classrooms, has now gone viral and seems to be essentially everywhere, integrated with almost every debate. In fact, the Oxford Dictionary chose "toxic" as its word of the year for 2018. Regardless of the term's ever-growing popularity, there seems to be a widely dispersed difficulty in understanding what it entails. And, of course, there is heavy backlash stemming from fragile men which only makes addressing the issue more challenging. In this writing, I will try to tackle the task of explaining what toxic masculinity is, whether it is a fundamental characteristic or a sociocultural practice, how it harms men themselves and ways to unlearn it.

It is at first important to understand what is considered as toxic masculine behaviour. Going for a night out with the boys, playing and having an interest in sports, growing a beard are completely acceptable forms of masculinity. Toxic masculinity is the practice of associating manhood with aggression, sex, and status—a world where strength reigns supreme and emotions are deemed as a weakness. Exercising violence to resolve situations is ideal

manliness while expressing what is seen as "feminine" behaviour hurts your status as a man. It is the cultural habitude of treating women as sex objects, "locker room talks", not being able to open up about your emotions and the rehearsal of the infamous "boys will be boys" ideology.

Now a question could arise about how these characteristics have come to be. Is toxic masculinity something that fundamentally develops in men or is it brought about through iteration over the ages? To answer that, we have to realise the concepts of sex and gender. Although conventionally we tend to use the terms sex and gender interchangeably, they are quite distinct.

Sex accounts for the biological and anatomical difference between females and males determined during conception and developed till you are an adult. Gender, however, is a social concept, not a biological one. It refers to the sociocultural differences assigned to people based on their sex—a practice that has been done for ages and moulded into society's expectations known better as "gender roles". Through this process of gender roles, we have come to define masculinity as being strong, independent and brave (which are positive attributes) but also insensitive, unemotional and aggressive (toxic attributes). They are simply stereotypes designated over the course of humanity's existence, an artificial outcome of a natural phenomenon. Unfortunately, we have become so tangled with the

system that it is difficult (however, not impossible) to comprehend a world without the barriers of this failing system.

By the advent of gender roles and its deeply ingrained stature in society, there are certain standards that are pressurised onto men such as garnering social status, showcasing physical strength and sexual domination. When men fail to attain such ideals and they fall short, it makes them feel insecure and anxious and it results in either depressive episodes or prompting the use of violence in order to feel

**Toxic masculinity is the practice of associating manhood with aggression, sex, and status—a world where strength reigns supreme.**

in control—a vicious spiralling cycle of destruction and agony. It is not only hurting people of other gender identities but men themselves, causing an escalation in the cases of men with mental health issues, suicide rates and the likelihood to commit violent crime. So, needless to say, it is important that we learn to deconstruct such a habit.



ARTWORK CREDIT: GABRIELLA MUSSURAKIS

Before I address methods of unlearning the practice of toxic masculinity, there is one more detail that I must discuss. The rise in conversations on the topic has also brought about a rise in the backlash received. Many men have perceived the call to address toxic masculine behaviour as an attack on their manhood itself. However, the call to deconstruct toxic masculinity is not an attack on men themselves but simply to undo the harmful practices involved. You can still be strong and independent but there is no need to showcase aggression or the self-harming habit of not being able to be sensitive and express emotions. This is not a movement to vilify men but to deconstruct and then reconstruct a more positive model of masculinity allowing room for them to feel more comfortable with their gender identity.

We finally arrive at the topic

of how to deconstruct this socio-cultural phenomenon. Like in any other case, the first step in the process of unlearning toxic masculinity is to recognise the problem itself. We need to first have a personal acknowledgment of our own behaviour and then hold other men accountable for theirs, starting with our immediate proximity and then spreading from there. At the same time, it is also important to validate ourselves and those around us, breaking down the stigma around being sensitive and vulnerable and mental health difficulties. It is all about creating spaces where men get to open up and have conversations about the difficulties they are facing—a space that men rarely have access to. Therefore, it is vital that we are able to create these safe spaces for men to unpack all of their baggage that comes with their manhood, critique them and eventually discard

the toxic notions.

Also, this practice is developed in cycles, being led from one generation to another. One way to stop that is for parents to take an active role in teaching their male children to be comfortable in their own skins. Fathers especially need to take an avid interest in their children's lives and teach by example. Taking care of children while being a man is nothing feminine and should be one of the roles of a father (not being the "man of the house" or "sole bread earner"). Schools and institutions as well can have a vital role to play in this movement through discussion groups and workshops.

As usual, communication truly is key. We need to have conversations within ourselves as well as with individuals of different gender identities to constantly learn and identify what behaviour is deemed toxic. Last, but not the least, it is important to understand that this is a continual process and the conversation needs to be maintained.

The objective is to become mindful of unhealthy masculine gender norms and deconditioning them while developing your own sense of masculinity—one that is untainted by societal expectations. And while deconstructing and unlearning an age-old practice is both painstaking and time-consuming, it is absolutely feasible and undeniably crucial.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**JUNE AHERN**  
SCOTTISH AUTHOR

*How hurtful it can be to deny one's true self and live a life of lies just to appease others.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

Across	27. Texas team	worker
1. Fish in the sky	29. Rough voice	7. Treaty goal
7. Runjng pros	33. Snowboarder	8. Magic setting
11. Cry from the audience	White	9. Pride youngster
12. War of 1812 port	34. Baryshnikov	10. Sofa's cousin
13. Like some shows	nickname	16. Mine section
14. Heaps	35. Knight	18 Deux follower
15. Low cards in pinochle	36. Clinics worker	20 Ohio city
16. Meager	37. TV's Falco	22 Japanese code of chivalry
17. Espies	38. It's my belief	23 Michigan neighbor
18. From that place	39. Writer Anita	24 City near the Dead sea
19. Scarlett's home	40 Calls	25 Large amount
21. Expected	Down	28 Tricks
22. It comes before	1. Lowly workers	Sean of Fudy
Psalms	2. Belly button type	31 Glowed
25. Groan inducer	3. Public outburst	32 Urban oases
26. Ceremony	4. Wakes	34 Flame flutterer
	5. Historic times	36 Brief drop
	6. Capitol Bldg.	

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

B	A	B	A	S	G	O	B	A	D
L	E	A	P	T	A	B	A	T	E
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S	E	C	F	A	D	P	S	I	
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O	C	E	A	N	I	R	E	N	
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