

PREVENTION OF CHILD MARRIAGE in remote and marginalised chars of northern Bangladesh

Friendship in association with The Daily Star organised a roundtable titled "Prevention of Child Marriage in remote and marginalised chars of Northern Bangladesh" on March 16, 2023. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



Golam Mortaza, Editor,
The Daily Star Bangla

Preventing child marriage requires a multifaceted approach. One crucial aspect is ensuring accountability of local government representatives and government officials, who are entrusted with the task to prevent child marriage. Empowering those involved in development work is also essential, as they can become agents of change in their communities and work towards preventing this social menace. Religion can play a powerful role in shaping attitudes and beliefs, so it is vital to engage religious leaders and communities in efforts to prevent child marriage. Addressing financial solvency is also critical, as poverty can be a contributing factor to practices like child marriage.



RECOMMENDATIONS

A whole-of-society approach is needed to prevent child marriage.

Strengthen child protection system in Bangladesh.

Ensure sufficient funding for the successful implementation of child marriage prevention programmes.

More primary and secondary schools should be established in rural and char areas to ensure education for marginalised people.

Make birth registration compulsory and set up registration facility at union parishad level.

Establish a department for children's affairs in the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs.

NCTB should include education on child rights and measures to prevent child marriage in their curriculum from pre-primary to college level.

Implement vocational training programmes in schools that empower girls with practical skills and knowledge, enabling them to become self-sufficient.

Prioritise comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and services for girls and women to promote their health and protect their rights.

Ensure the inclusion of women and girls in decision-making processes to promote gender equality and empower them to have a say in matters that affect their lives.



Ahmed Toufiqur Rahman, Deputy Director (Inclusive Citizenship), Friendship

Bangladesh has the world's third-highest rate of child marriage, with a prevalence of 51%. According to a World Bank report, the rate is higher in rural areas (60%) than in urban areas (55%), with Rajshahi and Rangpur being the most affected.

The Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government has undertaken multiple initiatives to prevent child marriage, including strengthening laws related to child marriage, raising the minimum legal age of marriage, providing girls access to education, providing income-generating activities for girls forming international partnerships developing policies, such as the National Action Plan to Eliminate Child Marriage 2018-2030 and the Child Marriage Restraint Act. Digital initiatives such as the Joy app, Tottho Apa, and a hotline (109) have been launched.

NGOs and other development agencies are also working with various organisations and awareness campaigns at the grassroots, district, and national levels. They empower girls through education, vocational training, leadership, and life skills development programs, while families receive support through financial assistance, livelihood, health, and social services.



Robert Chatterton Dickson, British High Commissioner to Bangladesh

Although Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in economic and social development over the past 50 years, the issue of preventing child marriage has not seen similar success. Child marriage not only harms individuals by impeding their health

and ability to live a fully equal life, but it also has harmful effects on society as a whole.

During a visit to the Char areas of Northern Bangladesh, I witnessed how marginalised and impoverished communities live beyond the purview of the government. Friendship, in addition to providing health, education, and livelihood services to the Char people, works to give women a voice in their community.

The policies and initiatives taken at the policy and higher levels need to align with the practical realities of marginalised communities in the Char areas. Friendship's approach is commendable as they base their expertise on respect for the communities and individuals they work with.



Tapan Karmaker, Executive Director, RDRS

A major portion of Kurigram district is located in the char areas, encompassing 49 unions. In 2017, RDRS launched a special project, Building Better Future for Girls (BBFG), to address the issue of child marriage in Kurigram district, including the char areas.

One of the project's initial interventions involved enrolling families with girls under 18 at risk of child marriage in the government's Social Safety Net program, which provides economic support to families to prevent them from marrying off their children. While three upazilas in Kurigram have been declared child marriage-free by the district administration after a survey conducted under the Prime Minister's guidance, social security for at-risk girls remains a major concern, particularly in remote Char areas.



Natalie McCauley, Chief, Child Protection Team, UNICEF

The child protection system in Bangladesh needs to be strengthened, and the number of social workers should be increased. Currently,

there are just over 3000 social workers, but more than 110,000 are required for the social welfare ministry to fulfill its mandate effectively.

The Child Helpline 1098 received 200,000 calls last year, and it has been able to stop many child marriages. More than 80% of these calls are related to violence, abuse, and exploitation. Unfortunately, nine out of ten children are affected by violence within their homes, pushing families towards harmful practices such as child marriages. We need to support these families in creating safe environments for their children so that they have other options.

Violence against women and children, including child marriage, costs more than 3% of the GDP. Bangladesh loses billions of dollars annually, whereas the cost of hiring one social worker is around 4000 USD a year. Therefore, increased budgets for children's welfare and the creation of a department for children's affairs in the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs are necessary.



Mosammat Lucky Akhter, Program Manager, Nagorik Uddyog

From our extensive experience working in disaster-prone areas of Rangpur and Barishal since 2004, it has become evident that families affected by natural disasters are particularly vulnerable to child marriage. Despite our efforts to raise awareness among these communities, families often resort to extreme measures during times of crisis, such as forcing their children into marriage. Our previous mass awareness campaigns have had limited

success, indicating that more targeted and sustained efforts are required at the grassroots level.



Dr Umme Busra Fateha Sultana, Associate Professor & Chairperson, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka

It is crucial to prevent early pregnancies and protect the health of young girls who are forced into child marriages. Moreover, providing support for their education and economic independence is essential even after marriage. Additionally, equipping them with self-defence skills and knowledge of legal help is vital.

To raise awareness about the dangers of child marriage, media can play a pivotal role, the Meena cartoon for instance has been an effective tool in creating awareness of social issues.



Onno Van Manen, Country Director, Save the Children, Bangladesh

Despite legislation addressing child marriage and sexual violence, there are still loopholes in the system. To empower and support children, particularly girls, it's essential to provide them with access and agency to address their challenges. Unfortunately, girls in char areas often lack access to technology and systems that could assist them. Girls may feel embarrassed or hesitant to come forward, so outreach efforts should be proactive. Incorporating sexual health education into school curricula is necessary. While preventive work with stakeholders is ongoing, child marriages persist because of a lack of negative consequences for facilitators. Addressing this gap is another critical area to address.



Marie Masdupuy, Ambassador of France to Bangladesh

Surprisingly, forced child marriages are still prevalent in Bangladesh despite the introduction long ago of family planning programs and their successful outreach to various parts of society.

Unfortunately, adolescent girls in rural areas tend to drop out of school as soon as they reach puberty due to lack of resources and societal pressure to get married early. To combat this issue, I believe that specialised social workers are needed to aid underage children and raise awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage.

Collaboration with governmental programmes and NGOs is crucial in preventing not only child marriage but also intra-family violence.



Md. Mainul Islam, Acting Country Director & Head of Programme, Norwegian Refugee Council, Bangladesh

Child marriage in Bangladesh is often a desperate measure taken by families facing economic hardship during natural disasters. To address this issue, we must provide alternative coping mechanisms to families in these situations.

In remote char areas, girls are often forced to drop out of school after primary level due to social pressures and lack of opportunities. We must advocate for the introduction of vocational courses designed for girls in these areas to equip them with life skills and promote self-sufficiency through income generation.



Nasima Akhter Joly, Secretary, National Girl Child Advocacy Forum

Nimmi Akhter, a tenth-grade student from Comilla, was forced into marriage without her consent, despite her desire to continue her studies and become self-sufficient. The local Kazi facilitated the marriage. He claimed that since the girl had reached puberty, there was no religious issue with the marriage. Puberty alone cannot be the indicator of a girl's adulthood; it takes a minimum of 18 years for girls' organs to mature for reproductive health. We need to campaign for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) to ensure the well-being of girls and women.

Simply relying on legal clauses will not be enough to combat child marriage. Women's participation in decision-making processes is essential, as in most cases, the mother and girl are unaware of the decision being finalised.



Barrister Ayesha Taasin Khan, Senior Director & Head of Inclusive Citizenship Sector, Friendship

While the Child Marriage Restraint Act has shown some impact in urban areas, rural communities remain largely unaffected, and child marriage continues to persist. The problem is compounded by the fact that the law allows girls to marry at the age of 16 under "special circumstances."

To truly combat child marriage, we need a social revolution that recognises the harm it causes, as well as institutional changes that provide girls with opportunities to improve their lives. One such opportunity is through vocational training programmes in schools that equip girls with the skills and knowledge to generate their income and become self-sufficient, reducing the burden of girls as liabilities.

The government should also take measures to inform girls about the Child Marriage Restraint Act and provide them with avenues to take action through digital platforms or through provisions such as Salish, ADR, etc.. While the Act is a significant step in addressing child marriage, it must be coupled with infrastructure and transformative societal change to have a meaningful impact.



Mohammad Rafiqul Islam, Director, Head Office, Islamic Foundation Bangladesh

Religious leaders, particularly Imams, hold a significant role and are respected in society.

They have proven to be effective in the facilitation and dissemination of important information to the public in promoting vaccination and breastfeeding programs in Bangladesh. Aligning social and transformative initiatives with religious morals can ensure sustainability and community acceptance. Islam also has a positive impact on health safety, and Imams can educate their followers on the harmful impacts of early motherhood. In a UNICEF-supported program, Imams emphasised that puberty alone is not a sufficient indicator for pregnancy. Their involvement can be crucial in promoting positive social change.



Amena Begum, Deputy Inspector General (Protection and Protocol), Special Branch, Bangladesh Police

The 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act emphasises the importance of

involving all relevant stakeholders, including GOs and NGOs, at the grassroots level. However, the act doesn't specify who should intervene when child marriages occur. It is important to note that child marriage is a non-cognizable offense, which limits the police's ability to take swift action.

Over the past three years, there have been over four crore calls made to the hotline number 999, but many people are not aware of the hotline number 109. To increase efficiency, it may be helpful to merge or redirect these two numbers. Additionally, a Women, Children, Elderly and Disabled helpdesk, operated by female police officers, has been established in all 659 police stations across the country. Regular supervision of this helpdesk is necessary, and there is a need for more female officers to staff it. Last year, this helpdesk assisted 144,000 women and children.



M A Akher, Director Planning, Department of Youth Development, Ministry of Youth and Sports

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) reports that approximately 8 million individuals aged 15-24 in Bangladesh are not engaged in employment, education, or training (NEET). Of this NEET population, 47% are women and 10% are men, accounting for a total of 28.8% of the youth population in the country. To address this issue, the Department of Youth Development has established over 19,800 Youth Clubs nationwide, 6,000 of which are registered with our department. There are also 71 Youth Training Centers across the country, where various training sessions are held throughout the year.

Given the complexity of this situation, we have partnered with the World Bank to propose a training program for individuals between the ages of 15 and 35, with a budget of 4,000 crores BDT. Girls will comprise 80% of the programme's beneficiaries since many young women who are married off early require education and training to become self-sufficient. We also provide soft loans to support sustainable businesses and self-sufficiency for these girls. Moreover, with the help of USAID, we are launching a skill-based training programme for girls aged 15-35 in 250 upazilas across Bangladesh.



Runa Khan, Founder & Executive Director, Friendship

Each child marriage prevented is equivalent to saving a life. Collaborative efforts by organisations and the government are essential in preventing child marriage, which is linked to poverty and climate change. Climate change can lead to poverty, which then drives parents to resort to forced child marriages.

We must adopt a holistic approach to tackle the issue of child marriage and create awareness at the grassroots level by involving both men and women. Everyone should understand the grave consequences of child marriage in terms of health, death, and disease. The solution should be comprehensive, and the government and other organizations should work towards alleviating poverty, especially in rural char areas.

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) should incorporate awareness about child rights and anti-child marriage measures from pre-primary to college level. We must provide young girls with inspiring female role models and leaders who can instill hope and self-respect in them.

The police should play a more active role, and we need to address the issue of inaccurate birth certificates for many children.

It is unacceptable for Bangladesh to be the third country in the world with the highest incidence of child marriage, and we must take a holistic approach rather than just planning to act.



Tanjim Ferdous, In Charge of NGOs and Foreign Missions at the Business Development Team, The Daily Star, & Moderator of the session

Child marriage stems from deep-seated gender inequality and the notion that girls and women are of lower value than boys and men. It is aggravated by factors such as poverty, inadequate education, harmful cultural practices, and insecurity, with drivers that vary by community and region.

The COVID-19 lockdown has led to a considerable rise in child marriage rates in Bangladesh, while climate change and the resulting displacement of communities have also served as catalysts for this issue.