

Rethinking the fight against child marriage

M Niaz Asadullah is professorial fellow in economics at North South University (NSU), Bangladesh, and editorial advisory board member of the journal 'Feminist Economics.'
Sara Hossain is senior advocate at the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, and honorary executive director of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST).
Zaki Wahhaj is professor of development economics at King's College London, UK.

M NIAZ ASADULLAH, SARA HOSSAIN and ZAKI WAHHAJ

Every year, on October 11, the International Day of the Girl Child is commemorated to renew public commitments to addressing the needs of girls globally. Despite some progress, girls around the world continue to face significant challenges in enjoying their fundamental rights and remain constrained by society, culture and the law in achieving their full potential. Regardless of their religion, ethnicity, caste, location or age, all girls have the right to a safe, educated and healthy life, and in making their own choices and decisions—not just during their formative years but as they become women.

Governments across the globe have launched numerous initiatives to promote the empowerment of girls and to ensure their human rights. In many areas, we have seen visible improvements, such as increased participation of girls in schools and public spaces. In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) introduced a set of new targets specifically aimed at states taking action to accelerate progress on securing the rights of the girl child. These included eliminating child marriage by 2030. However, inadequate state policies, and lack of action to shift deeply entrenched social norms continue to prevent millions of girls from realising their full potential.

In Bangladesh, there has been significant progress on many social indicators towards gender equality. While in 1990, girls in Bangladesh lagged behind boys in school attendance, the introduction of the Female Secondary School Stipend and Assistance Programme in

1994 reversed the situation. Various initiatives—such as adolescent development clubs, skills training programmes, and financial incentives including cash payments—have been taken up to mitigate the practice of child marriage, and particularly its socioeconomic drivers, i.e., lack of livelihood or economic opportunities, and critically the perception of the absence of safety and security for women outside of marriage.

Despite such efforts and three decades of education-focused interventions, Bangladesh continues to be ranked eighth in the world today in terms of the incidence of child marriage. According to the 2019 Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 51 percent of young women were married in childhood. According to a 2022 survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 40.9 percent of women aged 20-24 were married before turning 18, with rural areas showing even higher rates at 44.4 percent.

This year's theme for International Day of the Girl Child, "Girls' Vision for the Future," emphasises both the urgency of the issue and the hope that lies in girls' voices and aspirations. For Bangladesh, it is another opportunity for introspection: are we doing enough to combat child marriage, one of the biggest obstacles to girls' securing self-determination over their own futures? If so, why do we still see high rates of child marriage, despite significant improvements in women's economic, social and legal empowerment?

In recognition of the multi-dimensional nature of the challenge,

existing initiatives have been supplemented by changes in the law. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2017 introduced stricter penalties for underage marriages, that is for marriages where brides are aged below 18, and grooms below 21,



The continuing practice of child marriage is not only a violation of individual rights, it is a barrier to progress for the entire nation.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

alongside clear duties for those involved in arranging or solemnising marriages, and the establishment of new mechanisms—child marriage restraint committees—aimed at effective and timely response and prevention, engaging local government bodies and civil society.

It is necessary and useful to lay down this clear red line, as knowledge of the law and invocations of the threat of penalties for its breach can be empowering for young people to negotiate delays or alternatives to marriage with their parents and

communities. However, the law is not sufficient in itself particularly as it is unrealistic to expect such a law to be enforced through prosecution and punishment. On the other hand, if knowledge of the law, among both rights holders and duty bearers, can

be significantly expanded, it can play a real role, through its expressive power, in empowerment of young people and in preventing child marriages from taking place. Our own research suggests that simply increasing investment in education is not enough to address the problem. Based on a census of 21,236 households and a survey of 3,997 households conducted in September-October 2023 in urban neighbourhoods across four districts (Dhaka, Dinajpur, Khulna and Patuakhali), we found that 57

percent of young women aged 18-24 years in our study population were already married, and among them, 53.8 percent had married before the age of 18. The average years of schooling was 8.75. However, this was not sufficient to stem the tide of

These findings correspond to the baseline survey of the SafePlus programme, a new youth-led initiative designed to support peers at risk of early marriage that we launched last year. Funded by the Global Innovation Fund and implemented in collaboration with the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), SafePlus aims to create a network of youth groups capable of tackling child marriage in low-income communities, in urban areas including informal settlements. The programme empowers youth by providing leadership and negotiation training, along with education on their rights and remedies with respect to marriage and related services to enable them to catalyse preventive action. Critically it focuses on building understanding among young people and their guardians, and across the communities in which they live, about their right to consent, to make decisions, and to self-determination, and protection against violence, alongside building skills to access economic opportunities.

The struggle to end child marriage in Bangladesh requires fresh thinking and innovative strategies. While education remains a critical tool, our research indicates that more tailored, community-based interventions such as SafePlus may hold the key to creating sustainable change.

We can mark the International Day of the Girl Child this year by renewing our commitment to advancing the cause of girls' empowerment and right to self-determination. The continuing practice of child marriage is not only a violation of individual rights; it is a barrier to progress for the entire nation. We owe it to the next generation to act decisively and ensure a more equitable future for all girls in Bangladesh, ensuring that young people are at the forefront of these changes, and in charting the course of their own lives and freedoms.

RANKING REALITIES

Our higher education strategy needs a redesign

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is professor of English at Dhaka University.



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The announcement of university rankings has caused a considerable stir. For the cynics, the absence of any Bangladeshi university among the top 800 institutions recently ranked by Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THEWUR) 2025 is unacceptable. Optimists view the presence of five universities in the 801-1000 bracket as a significant achievement. There are four new entries in this category: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University (BSMRAU), Jahangirnagar University, Daffodil International University (DIU), and Jashore University of Science and Technology (JUST), joined by North South University (NSU). This year, THEWUR found 2,092 universities eligible; 16 are from Bangladesh.

The position of the country's premier universities, including Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Dhaka University (DU), Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), and BRAC University, outside the 1000 list has raised some concerns. These three universities found themselves in the cohort of Rajshahi University (RU), Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology (CUET), and Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET) in the 1001-1200 band. Chittagong University (CU), American International University of Bangladesh (AIUB), Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology (RUET), and Khulna University (KU) are listed among the 1500 range, along with Jagannath University (JnU).

Ranking is an intricate process. Each ranking agency uses its own parameters, which don't necessarily align with our local contexts or institutional strengths. The metrics of teaching, research environment, research quality, industry engagement, and international outlook applied by THEWUR rely heavily on research that is indexed exclusively in the global database Elsevier. Research or reports published in Bangla or non-Elsevier journals don't count. Such exclusion

undervalues knowledge produced in the Bangladeshi ecosystem as it compels stakeholders to opt for English-language publications and metrics-driven research.

The heavy presence of technical universities on the list suggests the bias of the ranking agency toward citation-driven calculus. Overemphasis on ranking may lead to a compromise of our fundamental educational goals. The focus should be on fostering research and teaching environments through a collaborative approach with industry and the international scene. Political considerations, unplanned institutional growth, and large class sizes throw a spanner in such efforts. On top of that, most universities don't have any ranking policy or dedicated cell to document relevant data and make them available online.

At DU, I personally witness the sluggishness of my colleagues and certain departments in updating their records. Internal politics and rivalry often lead to non-cooperation from both faculty and staff. Teachers often refrain from using their institutional digital ID to conduct research with external bodies or apply for grants from donors. This likely holds true for public universities operating under the 1973 university law. Private and technical universities exhibit a relatively high level of discipline in this regard.

Missing or misrepresented data has hurt DU. The key statistics shown on the university's website display 194,187 students. This figure includes international students of the affiliated and medical colleges of the university, but it has negatively impacted the university's score in almost all categories except for overseas students (three percent). However, DU remains resilient, with its faculties prominently featured in the subject-wise ranking. The spread shows the strength of the academic disciplines of the featured universities.

Internationalisation is one area where most of our universities suffer. DIU has claimed five percent of its students and staff are international, while at BSMU and BAU, the

figures stand at three percent and one percent, respectively. DIU has scored an impressive 65.2 for its international outlook. The universities that have done well in this sector have conducted joint research, co-authored with overseas faculty members, or arranged inbound and outbound student/faculty mobility.

Our global rankings profile acts as a health card for our higher education. We can run a series of diagnostic tests to identify the problem. Or we can simply utilise the ranking benchmarks as a template to improve upon. We can design our targeted actions backwards, taking into account the ranking criteria.

The high performers of the region, e.g., India and Malaysia, have successfully done so by learning from global best practices and customising

Our global rankings profile acts as a health card for our higher education. We can run a series of diagnostic tests to identify the problem. Or we can simply utilise the ranking benchmarks as a template to improve upon. We can design our targeted actions backwards, taking into account the ranking criteria.

them to suit local needs. India, for instance, benefited from investing in STEM education while partnering with the private sector. As a result, it has 22 institutions in the global top 800 list. Conversely, Malaysia has 12 universities in the top 800 buoyed by their initiatives in internationalisation that promote joint research and faculty exchange programmes.

In our local context, we can strategically consider how smaller investments in research and teaching can yield long-term benefits. And to make our higher education sustainable, we need to render strategic support for research in disciplines that don't traditionally score high in global rankings but are crucial for national development, such as humanities and social sciences. Our universities lack a strong research culture. No wonder we scored the lowest in the research environment category. The top scorer, BUET, obtained 16.4, followed by BRACU with a score of 11.7. The issue

of brain drain also influences our ranking, as many of our talented and meritorious academics leave for better opportunities abroad.

NSU and BRACU, with their policies of mandatory second degrees from abroad and PhDs as the minimum criteria for assistant professorship have encouraged Bangladeshi scholars and researchers to return home. They have supported this policy by providing competitive salaries, research grants, and institutional autonomy as incentives for academics. On the other hand, the paltry pay at public universities is far from ideal for retaining talents or cultivating a research-friendly environment. The government can learn from China, India or Pakistan, which have successfully implemented reverse brain drain initiatives. These countries have introduced policies that allow diaspora scholars to maintain their international connections while contributing to the local academic ecosystem, creating a virtuous cycle of knowledge exchange and innovation.

Bangladesh's universities, too, must tap into the expertise of their expatriate communities. To advance our global academic standing, educational lobbying can be instrumental. Using the soft power of the current government to advocate for our universities on international platforms could open new opportunities for collaboration, funding and visibility. Bangladesh's diplomatic missions also need to adopt a proactive role in promoting the country's universities, facilitating partnerships with international institutions, and attracting global talent. The local universities can create a consortium to share resources and promote local and regional research outputs, albeit in vernacular languages, as major contributions to global knowledge. The University Grants Commission (UGC) can also play a central role in creating a common platform.

Improving Bangladesh's position in global university rankings is a challenge that we must meet head-on. While backward designing strategies can assist us in aligning with ranking criteria and learning from our peers, strategic interventions like reverse brain drain and educational lobbying can provide a clear path to follow. Then again, the focus should not solely be on rankings. Our quest for global excellence needs to combine international recognition with national development.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Sprawling tales
- 6 Site of a biblical tower
- 11 Italian seaport
- 12 Love to pieces
- 13 Political crime
- 14 Poison
- 15 Minnow or marlin
- 17 "Sure thing!"
- 18 Be heedful
- 22 Sea eagle
- 23 Made a quick thrust
- 27 Messy sorts
- 29 "Beauty and the Beast" heroine
- 30 Adds up
- 32 Trick
- 33 Slickers and

DOWN

- 1 Nest sight
- 2 For each
- 3 One — million
- 4 Java joint
- 5 Glossy fabric
- 6 Soaking spot
- 7 Brouhaha
- 8 Like some cars
- 9 Buffalo's lake

- 10 Eye part
- 16 Costa del —
- 18 Final, for one
- 19 Singer Guthrie
- 20 Shoelace problem
- 21 Snack in a gym bag
- 24 Sticky stuff
- 25 "Frozen" queen
- 26 Doe or buck
- 28 Hit, in a way
- 31 Knight's title
- 34 "Keen!"
- 35 Harbor structure
- 36 Beige
- 37 Blue hue
- 40 Try out
- 42 Ancient
- 43 Backgammon cube
- 44 Lobed organ

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
11						12				
13						14				
			15		16		17			
18	19	20				21				
22					23		24	25	26	
27				28		29				
30						31		32		
			33			34				
35	36	37		38						
39			40			41		42	43	44
45						46				
47						48				

3-6

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

F	I	N	E	D		I	R	I	S	H
A	G	A	V	E		R	U	N	T	O
C	U	B	I	T		A	E	S	O	P
T	A	B	L	E	T				U	K
O	N	E		C	O	D	D	L	E	D
R	A	D		T	R	E	A	T	S	
				P	I	E	T	Y		
	A	S	H	O	R	E		S	K	A
S	I	T	I	N	O	N		T	E	D
E	R	A			S	T	A	R	E	D
C	O	P	E	S		I	N	A	N	E
T	U	L	S	A		O	T	T	E	R
S	T	E	E	P		N	E	A	R	S

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com