

Child Marriage in Bangladesh

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Child marriage is a wide-ranging problem in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has the fourth-highest rate of child marriage before age 18 in the world. Child marriage has been illegal in Bangladesh since 1929, and the minimum age of marriage has been set at 18 for women and 21 for men since the 1980s. Lack of proper action by the government and overlooking by local administration consents child marriage, including of very young girls. Usually poverty in the families pushes them towards the decision to have girls married early.

Factors driving child marriage

In Bangladesh the factors driving child marriage are poverty, natural disasters, lack of access to education, social pressure, harassment, and dowry. Child marriage is an adjustment mechanism for poor families. The major causes of child marriages are as follows:

- Poverty is a major underpinning factor encouraging early marriage. Young girls are often considered as an economic burden by their families and their marriage to an older man and into another family is often a family survival strategy in order to obtain financial security.
- 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 depend;
- Poor girls lack access to education because their families cannot afford fees for exams, uniforms, stationery, and other associated costs even when education is “free”;
- Social pressures and traditions, including the widespread practice of paying dowry, and lower dowries for younger girls, make child marriage accepted and expected in some communities.
- The practice of dowry requiring a bride’s family to pay significant sums to the groom – encourages the marriage of the youngest adolescent girls because younger brides typically require smaller dowries. Dowry demands can continue after the wedding and sometimes result in violence against the bride when families are unable to pay.
- Fear of Sexual Harassment of young daughters and failure by police to stem this harassment is another cause. Early marriage is seen as a way to “protect” a girl’s sexuality in an unsafe environment.

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 turn towards early marriage. Families described feeling under pressure to arrange marriages quickly for their young daughters in the wake of a disaster. This was particularly common among families who faced losing their home and land through the gradual destruction caused by river erosion.

Costs associated with attending school, especially at the secondary level, remains out of reach for many children, and for girls in Bangladesh the consequence can often be child marriage.

Violence against girls and lack of physical safety of girls, especially in rural areas are commonly the subject to sexual harassment and physical assault on the way to school and even in the classroom.

Because of these problems, parents are hesitant to send their daughters long distances to school over safety concerns. Parents find having an adolescent unmarried daughter at home equally worrying because she continues to be a potential target for sexual crimes. Moreover, keeping a girl that has attained puberty at home increases the risk of self-initiated courtship or marriage. There is strong social stigma attached to pre-marital sex and rape, marrying the daughter off at the earliest opportunity is seen by the parents as the only way to ensure her physical safety and maintain family honour and respect.

Statistics:

- According to a UNICEF study.
 - ✓ 29 percent of girls in Bangladesh married before age 15,
 - ✓ Two percent of girls in Bangladesh are married before age 11.
- 66 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18.
- Legally, the minimum age of marriage is 21 for boys and 18 for girls.
- Only 45 per cent of adolescent girls are enrolled in secondary school and fewer attend regularly.
- One third of teenage girls aged 15 to 19 are mothers or are already pregnant.

Consequences:

Child marriage damages the lives of girls and their families in Bangladesh, including the discontinuation of secondary education, serious health consequences including death as a result of early pregnancy, abandonment, and domestic violence from spouses and in-laws.

Early marriage causes girls to drop out of education and limits their opportunities for social interaction and good employment. New brides are expected to work in their husbands' households and are subject to the same hazards as child domestic workers.

Girls married at younger age experience intense pressure to become pregnant. Adolescent mothers are more likely to suffer from birthing complications with considerable health risk than adult women. For younger mothers who are still in the process of maturation, Maternal Mortality rates are much higher. Teen Mothers are twice as likely as older mothers to die during childbirth. For babies born to mothers younger than 14, it is 50% more likely for the baby to die than if born to a mother over 20 years of age.

Early marriage aggravates girls towards acquiring skills and makes them unable to integrate in to the labour market.

Domestic violence is more prevalent in the case of early marriage.

Early marriage propagates to an unequal society, increasing female vulnerability, powerless and landless situation, as well as restricting personal and psychological development.

Girls married at young ages are more likely to experience multiple pregnancies, recurrent miscarriage and termination of pregnancy and delivery related complications. They are unable to achieve healthy pregnancies, look after their children and family because of poor physical and mental health, and susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases, fistula, and poor sexual health.

Adolescent girls suffer from inferiority complex and lack confidence in dealing with other people. Marriages involving a very young wife and much older husband tend to be less cohesive, riddled with marital strife and dissatisfaction, and more likely to end in divorce, abandonment, or polygamy. Young brides with much older husband have higher risk of becoming widows early in life than older brides.

Early marriage leads to low female labour force participation and impedes economic growth and development.

Legislation:

In Bangladesh the legal age for marriage is 21 for boys and 18 for girls. This was established with the national Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929. However, the authorities rarely intervene to stop child marriages and parents continue to marry off their daughters secretly. *[Despite this legislation, the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey has found that the average age for marriage of girls is 16.4 years.]*

At the international level, there are several legal instruments, which suggest the illegality of child marriage. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that marriage can be entered into “only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses”.

The 1979 CEDAW prohibits child marriage, stipulating 18 as the minimum age in its General Recommendation 21.

Government Initiatives

Bangladesh has attained gender parity in primary and secondary school enrollment. Bangladesh's current MMR is about 194 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, it has fallen by more than 66 percent over the last two decades. Poverty declined from 34 percent in 2000 to 24.8 percent in 2015.

The government has taken important steps in facilitating access to education by elimination primary level school fees.

Bangladesh Government has not taken adequate measures to stop child marriage, in spite of so many propaganda and commitment to do so. In a recent statement Prime Minister made an attempt to lower the age of marriage for girls from 18 to 16 years.

In 1994, the Female Stipend Programme Gender Equality in Bangladesh (FSP) was launched, issuing stipends to girls aged 11 to 14 in secondary education providing they had 75% attendance and a 45% score in end-of-year tests as well as providing they remain unmarried until sitting the Secondary School Certificate or reaching the age of 18. This scheme has been successful in delaying marriage and motherhood as well as increasing the possibility of access to the labour market for young women. In 1995, 1.1 million Bangladeshi girls attended secondary school; by 2005, this had increased to 3.9 million. The World Bank report suggests that the proportion of married girls between 13 and 15 years of age dropped from 29% to 14%, whilst for those aged from 16 to 19 the proportion dropped from 72% to 65%, implying a significant effect of the stipend programme on delaying marriage.

The joint programme targets other Millennium Development Goals such as reducing poverty (MDG #1) by empowering women, increasing universal education (MDG #2) by revising the curriculum from a gender perspective, improving child and maternal health (MDGs #4 and #5) by providing better access to health care for women and girls, and combating HIV and AIDS (MDG #6) by addressing women's vulnerability to the virus.

The Joint Program to Address Violence against Women in Bangladesh involves nine UN agencies, 11 government ministries and a large number of local development partners. It operates on three tiers: strengthening the policy and legal framework in order to reduce violence against women, changing attitudes of men, women and youth to affect behavior related to violence, and protecting survivors of gender-based violence.

Projects and Development partner assistance

UNICEF plays an important role in Bangladesh through running an adolescent empowerment project to help prevent child marriage, dowry and other forms of abuse and exploitation of adolescents,

especially girls. The project involves Education on rights, Reproductive Health, Sexually transmitted diseases and violence across 28 districts, particularly targeting rural communities.

Recommendations:

- Government agencies providing assistance to families in poverty or affected by disasters should be better harnessed to prevent child marriage.
- The government and the development partners should focus more on the strategy to keep girls in school, assist girls at risk of child marriage, fight sexual harassment, and provide access to reproductive health information and contraceptive supplies.
- Enforcement of law relating to early marriage is a principal area in which implementation and practice need to be adjusted in order to limit forced, child marriage and its negative effects. Efforts must be improved to raise awareness and educate at all levels of society from grassroots initiatives to governmental policies. Bangladesh's law on child marriage needs to be reformed, but even more importantly, it needs to be fully enforced.
- Government and non-government bodies need to come together to promote advocacy on this issue, being sure to reach out to the poorest and most rural communities in Bangladesh.
- Emphasis should be given for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the birth and marriage registration systems, especially their coverage and accessibility in rural areas enforcing the legal age at marriage, and strengthening the penalties for non-compliance.
- Empowering a girl is an essential step in the direction of enabling her to choose what she wants in life.
- Contents relating to Child marriage may be included within the school curriculum. This would ensure an open ended discussion and provide a legitimate platform for girls to raise their voices and set an apprehension if a girl is forced into marriage.
- More assistance both technical and financial is needed for the promotion of activities restricting child marriage.

Conclusion

Awareness is growing that marriage of girls under age 18 is illegal under Bangladeshi law. Bangladesh has international obligations to protect the rights of girls and women. Comprehensive efforts may address the issue of child marriage to eradicate it completely.