

## Stopping Child Marriage in Bangladesh: A Look through Gender Lens

**Background:** Child marriage is a critical public health challenge prevalent across the borders and cultures. According to UNICEF (2020), an estimated 650 million women alive today were married as children while yearly around 12 million girl children were married. Child marriage and adolescent motherhood are intrinsically linked. It is estimated that 90% of adolescent motherhood in the low-and-middle income countries occurred among girls who were already married.

Child marriage is the result of the interplay of economic and underlying social forces which is rooted in gender inequality and the belief that girls and women are inferior to boys and men. It is fueled by poverty, illiteracy, harmful social norms and practices, and insecurity. When experiencing acute poverty, families and sometime girls themselves see marriage as a means to reduce family costs and gain financial security. This idea is reinforced by prevailing negative social norms that devalue and commodify girls.

**Causes and Consequences of Child Marriage:** In communities where the practice is prevalent, marrying a girl child is part of prevailing social tradition and norms that reflect the low value accorded to the human rights of girls and women. Child marriage affects both girls and boys but it affects girls disproportionately in South Asia. The impacts of child marriage and early childbearing on multiple development outcomes have implications for health and economic wellbeing.

Child marriage profoundly affects the girls who marry early as well as their children in many ways. It leads girls and women to have children earlier and more children over their lifetime compared to women who got married at later age. It affects girls' educational attainment negatively and thereby curtails future opportunities for them to compete in the job market. Child marriage may also lead to higher health risk for young mothers because their bodies are not yet fully developed. As these young adolescents are at higher risk of suffering life-threatening conditions as a result of childbirth like obstetric fistula and hemorrhage, or even death. These impacts have negative consequences not only for the girls marrying early but also for their children and for communities and societies as a whole.



Child marriage has a large impact on fertility and population growth. According to the Global Synthesis Report on the Economic Impacts of Child Marriage (2017), child marriage increases total fertility for women by 17% to 26% depending on the age at marriage. Ending child marriage would reduce the national total fertility rate on average by 11%.

**Legal Provisions:** The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 was amended in 2017 keeping minimum age at marriage for girls and males at 18 and 21 years respectively. Although there has been provision in the amended law (Section 19 of the Act) that girls below the age of 18 could be married off under 'special circumstances'. Moreover, Bangladesh is the signatory of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW) and other international human rights treaties that also prohibit child marriage.

**Child Marriage in the Context of COVID-19:** The COVID-19 pandemic has a profound impact on the everyday lives of girls and the enjoyment of their human rights. Child marriage has become manifold during the pandemic and it continues to rise. Only 20% of incidents of child marriage are reported while

the rest of the incidents are conducted secretly. Before the pandemic, Bangladesh secured a notable development in reducing child marriage but growing concerns regarding joblessness, poverty, food scarcity, fear and insecurity among parents due to the pandemic are blamed for a surge in child marriage.

**Reaching SDG Target for Child Marriage:** Bangladesh together with international community has committed to the Sustainable Development Goals target 5.3 to end child marriage to achieve gender equality by 2030. Meeting the SDG target to end child marriage by 2030, or the national target to end child marriage by 2041, will require a major push. According to UNICEF, progress must be at least 8 times faster than the rate observed over the past decade to meet the national target, or 17 times faster to meet the SDG target.

### **Some Facts about Child Marriage**

- Every year, 12 million girls marry before the age of 18. Child marriage happens across countries, cultures and religions.
- Worldwide, an estimated 650 million girls and women alive today were married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Globally, the total number of girls married in childhood is estimated at 12 million per year.
- Bangladesh is home of 38 million child brides including currently married girls along with women who were first married in childhood. Of these, 13 million married before age 15.
- In Bangladesh, nearly 5 in 10 child brides gave birth before age 18, and 8 in 10 gave birth before age 20. Married girls are over four times more likely to drop school than unmarried girls.

**Way Forward:** Girls' education is considered to be one of the best options to prevent child marriage. Bangladesh government introduced scholarship program for girls up to twelve grades to promote girls education that resulted in a decline in dropout of school and is a contributing factor to delay girls marriage. A systematic review for the UN (2021) found that the most effective interventions to reduce the prevalence of child marriage helped girls to remain in school through cash or in-kind transfers. Child marriage not only puts a stop to girls' hopes and dreams. It impedes efforts to end poverty and achieve economic growth and equity. Ending this practice is not only the morally right thing to do but also the economically smart thing to do.