

Child marriage in Bangladesh





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Plan / Bernice Wong



Status of child marriage in Bangladesh

According to a UNICEF report released in 2011, one-third of women aged 20 to 24 in Bangladesh were married by the age of 15, and about two-thirds were married by the age of 18.¹ A recent study by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research in Bangladesh shows an improving trend, with 64 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 married before 18 years of age.² According to this study, a higher proportion of women (71 per cent) in rural areas are married before 18, compared to 54 per cent of women in urban areas. The study also shows a strong association between child marriage and education and economic status, with higher rates of child marriage among women with low or no education and for those from families living in poverty.

Among women aged 20 to 24, there has been a negligible increase in the median age at marriage, from 16 years in 2004 to 16.4 in 2007 and 16.6 in 2011.³

The decline in the incidence of child marriages has been slow. Among women who are currently aged 45 to 49, 77 per cent were married by the time they were 18. The corresponding figure for women aged 20 to 24 is 70 per cent. The change is more significant with regard to marriages below 15. 43 per cent of women aged 45 to 49 were married by age 15; the corresponding figure for women aged 15 to 19 is 23 per cent.⁴

Under the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18 years for a female and 21 years for a male. Penalties for child marriage according to the Act are imprisonment for one month or a fine of up to 1,000 taka (€9.4) or both. Any adult or guardian arranging and permitting child marriage can be convicted under the law. Girls cannot be sentenced to imprisonment. To be pursued, a case has to be registered with a court of law within one year of the marriage. If an impending child marriage is brought to a court's notice, it can be legally prohibited. However, once completed, a child's marriage is not considered invalid (Emory Law School no date). In 2004, the Birth and Death Registration Act was amended and makes it essential for a bride and groom each to have a birth certificate before a marriage can be registered.

Bangladesh is a signatory to the UN Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages. This Convention requires signatory states to obtain consent from both parties entering into a marriage and to establish a legal minimum age for marriage.

Plan's programmes in Bangladesh

Plan has been operating in Bangladesh since 1994 and works in four districts across the country - Dinajpur, Gazipur, Lalmonirhat and Nilphamari - and in Dhaka city. Plan Bangladesh has developed a multi-pronged community development programme using a rights-based, community-centred child development (CCCD) approach. The programme includes advocacy initiatives at national and local levels, awareness-raising activities about child marriage and other developmental issues among various stakeholders, and the promotion of community-based organisations of children and adults. Plan Bangladesh also provides training on life skills, health and sanitation, and vocational skills to children.

In 1998, Plan Bangladesh conducted a situation analysis as a part of its CCCD approach. Two core findings at that time were a high prevalence of child marriage and dowry payments. Since 2005, a core area of work for Plan Bangladesh has been ending child marriage.

In its Country Strategic Plan 2010-2015, Plan Bangladesh lists reduction of child marriage in rural areas as one of its programme objectives.⁵ At the programme unit level, the objective is to increase the mean age of girls at marriage from 15 to 18 in Plan's working areas by 2015, and to strengthen government mechanisms by supporting its online birth registration system and enforcement of the Child Marriage Restraint Act. This will be achieved through awareness-raising activities among stakeholders, life-skill training for adolescents, promotion of peer leaders and advocacy efforts with duty bearers. Child marriage is also addressed through Plan's community-managed health care programme, which includes a focus on adolescent girls. The indicators for measuring outcomes are: mean age of marriage; the number of districts that have established online birth registration information systems; and the number of police stations that have established a system for reporting child marriages. Plan is also part of an advocacy effort aimed at incorporating the issue of child marriage into the national text books for secondary education.

To provide inputs for strengthening its work on child marriage, Plan Bangladesh commissioned a national-level study on child marriage.⁶ (The objective of the study was to understand the present situation of child marriage in the country and identify causes of, and factors associated with, child marriage. Findings from this study are referred to in this report.

Objectives and research questions

The study sought to explore the perceptions of different stakeholders regarding the causes and consequences of child marriage and the efficacy of Plan's programming in addressing these factors. It also sought to understand the issue from the perspective of children who were exposed to Plan's programmes and to compare their responses to those who were not.

The main research question the study sought to answer was, "How effectively have Plan's child-centred approaches in Bangladesh, India and Nepal addressed the causes and consequences of child marriage?" To answer this question, the research examined how Plan's interventions in each of the three countries worked at the individual, family and community levels.

More specifically, the study sought to answer a series of sub-questions relating to the main research question. These were:

Have Plan's interventions in Bangladesh:

- i. Increased awareness regarding child marriage laws and the consequences of child marriage among individuals, families and the community?
- ii. Increased negotiation skills among children and empowered them to prevent child marriage?
- iii. Succeeded in increased awareness and action by local and national state institutions to prevent child marriage?
- iv. Succeeded in creating enabling environments for the reduction of child marriage as a result of its partnership with the state and advocacy efforts?
- v. Successfully transitioned from a service delivery to a rights-based approach?

The study also sought to understand what can be learnt from specific cases of child marriage prevention and examples of best practice within Plan's programming and advocacy efforts.

Methodology

The study was based on primary qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 35 interviews were conducted with children and parents, 12 key informant interviews were conducted with community leaders and government officials, and ten focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with girls and boys. Of the 35 interviews with children and parents, there were two with role models and one with the mother of a role model. The young women identified as role models were girls who had resisted child marriages. The mother of the role model was a person who was educating her daughter despite financial hardship and was going to arrange her marriage only after completion of secondary school.

The study was conducted in Nilphamari and Rangpur districts of Rangpur division and Gazipur district of Dhaka division. Gazipur represents a semi-urban district located near Dhaka city. Nilphamari and Rangpur are located on the northwestern corner of Bangladesh and are less urbanised than Gazipur. Three-fourths of the interviews were conducted in areas where Plan is active; the remainder were conducted in 'non-Plan' areas. The objective of doing the latter was to get responses from persons not exposed to Plan's programmes. The data was collected between 2 and 29 July, 2012.

Table 1: Number of Interviews and FGDs by district

District	Nilphamari	Rangpur	Gazipur		Total
Upazilla	Jaldhaka	Gangachara	Shreepur	Kapashai	
	Plan	Non-Plan	Plan	Non-Plan	
Villages	Nagar Mirgan West Shimulbari Koimari	Alombidhitor West Monirum	Nijkhujekhani	Baroigaon Rareigaon	
Unmarried girls	4	3	4	2	13
Married girls	5	2	4	2	12
Parents	3	2	2	2	9
KIIs	6		6		12
FGDs	5		5		10
Total	23	7	21	6	57

Nargis Begum (middle), 19, used to dream of becoming a teacher. Now a mother twice over, she has had to rethink her life.

“I was studying in grade 8 when child marriage shattered all my dreams,” she says. She was 16 when her parents arranged for her to marry an older man from the same district in central Bangladesh.



In the interviews and FGDs, the following themes were discussed:

- i. Education patterns among girls and boys and the effect of this on delaying marriage. The changing trends with regard to education for boys and girls.
- ii. The aspirations of young persons and of parents for their sons and daughters.
- iii. People in the community perceived as role models.
- iv. Perceptions of the importance of marriage; factors determining at what age young people are married; decision-making regarding marriage; and role of children in marriage decisions.
- v. The causes and consequences of child marriage.
- vi. Knowledge about marriage laws and the effectiveness of these laws in preventing child marriage; factors responsible for the current status of law implementation.
- vii. Child rights in the family and the role of girls and boys in decision-making in the household.
- viii. The role of civil society organisations, and specifically Plan, in preventing early marriage.

Limitations

The focus of this study was on the perceptions of the different stakeholders regarding the causes of child marriage and the efficacy of Plan’s programming in addressing these causal factors. It reflects not only the ‘supply’ of Plan’s interventions, but also the response to these interventions from the communities and the state. This study did not have a quantitative component and therefore did not aim to measure any changes in the incidence of child marriage. The aim was to understand the changes in attitudes and behaviour in the families and communities that Plan works with, and to examine how Plan’s interventions address factors relating to child marriages in these contexts. In this report, we let the voices of girls and boys, parents, local leaders and government officers tell the story.

In the remainder of this chapter, we present the study findings. The first section discusses the causes of child marriage, followed by a discussion on prevention of child marriage.

Discussion of key findings

The causes of child marriage

Marriage in Bangladesh is considered inevitable and necessary - it is a parental duty that must be performed. According to most respondents, girls are now commonly married aged around 15 to 17, unlike a decade or more ago when the common age at marriage for girls was 12 to 14. The age at marriage is determined by a range of normative and structural factors, such as tradition, economic situation of the family and available opportunities. In addition there are circumstantial factors that influence the decision such as finding a good groom or difficult family situations. In recent times, there has been an increase in self-initiated marriages. These various reasons for child marriage are discussed below.

Traditional norms, issues of security and social pressure

An important cause of child marriage emanates from traditional norms and their concomitant social pressure. Marriage for girls is seen as necessary and inevitable, and a daughter's marriage is one of the main parental responsibilities. It is also the parents' responsibility to protect the daughter's chastity until she is married. Given these factors, parents feel it is time to discharge their 'responsibility' and marry their daughter once a girl attains puberty. Social pressure adds to the family's own sense of responsibility about a daughter's marriage, especially when a girl begins to 'look' mature.

"I was a burden for the parents until I got married. I was the reason of tension for my parents. Now their burden has reduced as I got married... Neighbours are not saying anything negative. My father, mother and brother are happy now."

(Role model⁷ aged over 18, Nilphamari)

The traditional perception of girls being caregivers sometimes leads to daughters who are older siblings being pulled out of school to take care of younger siblings.

Moderator: *"What was the reason for which you stopped her schooling?"*

Respondent: *"To manage the family. She had to look after the livestock I have. She had to take care, prepare food for the other children I have. I work outside, so she needs to stay at home. Ours is a needy family."*

(Father of girl married one month short of 18 birthday, Nilphamari)

In cases such as the above, the girl is made to discontinue her studies to take up household responsibilities. Once a girl discontinues her studies and is staying at home, she is more likely to be married as a child.





Sherina is 24 years old. She has already gone through 11 pregnancies. After six miscarriages and five neonatal deaths, she decided to adopt a child. Daily prayers have become part of Sherina's coping mechanism.

Poverty and child marriage

Girls in poorer families are more vulnerable to child marriages. For one, girls in these families generally study less because of the costs associated with education.⁸ Sometimes parents can afford to educate only one or two children, and boys are more likely to continue with their schooling while girls are pulled out of school. If a teenage girl is not in school, parents are more likely to get her married.

“But in other cases it is observed that if a girl doesn’t study and is sitting idle at home then she is married off quickly and if she studies, and does well in her exams, then she is married off later.”

(Unmarried girl aged over 18, Nilphamari)

Another factor mentioned by respondents is a lack of security both at home and in public spaces, which affects poorer girls more than those who are better off. Protecting adolescent girls and providing secure living conditions becomes harder for poorer parents. This also becomes a reason for her early marriage.

“Sometimes the girls face even teasing when they walk on the roads, a boy constantly follows a beautiful girl of a poor family. They do not disturb girls of influential families but the poor families marry off the girl because of security.”

(Schoolteacher, Goshinga, Gazipur)

Further, findings suggest that generally a younger bride can be married with a smaller dowry. Poorer families therefore marry their daughters early to avoid this expense. While the reason of smaller dowries for younger girls was not spelt out in the data, we believe that such cases would be found more commonly in situations where girls have lower educational levels. While an educated girl is ‘valued’ for her education, those with less education are likely to derive their ‘value’ from their relative youth, particularly in a patriarchal society. Given the lower level of education among girls from poorer families, this factor may play a role in determining the age at marriage.

Thus, poverty leads to child marriages because of the multiple vulnerabilities of poorer families. Given the greater insecurity faced by poor families, finding a good groom can become the precipitating factor for a child marriage.

“Nowadays, girls are not getting married as early as before; now people have become aware. But a few days ago my brother got his daughter married at the age of 12 years... The problem is my brother is physically disabled (he has only one leg) and that is why he got his daughter married when he got a good groom.”

(Mother of unmarried girl aged below 18, Nilphamari)

Poverty is seen as a factor commonly pushing parents to marry their daughters when they are still children. In a few instances, however, poverty may actually delay a daughter’s marriage.

“I am poor man. I can’t manage the money. People gossip that ami amar meyeke buri banaichi (I am letting my daughter grow old). But what can I do? While marrying her off, I have asked for help of others and arranged the ceremony of her marriage.”

(Father whose daughter married at 18)

However, such cases were rare, and generally it was felt that child marriages were more common among poorer families.

Role of children in early marriages

A relatively less discussed and understood reason for child marriage that emerged was self-initiation. It was found that there are instances where young people are choosing to get married before the legal permissible age, with or without parental consent.⁹ A young unmarried girl in Gazipur told us that one of the reasons child marriages were happening was the decisions the girls themselves made.

“It [child marriage] is happening but parents are not responsible for this in most of the cases. Most of the girls get married by themselves at their early ages without the consent of their parents. They escape from their house and families to get married, therefore parents are bound to get them married early.”

(Unmarried girl aged under 18, Nijkhujekhani, Gazipur)

Several parents, community leaders and children said that the increase in child marriages initiated by children was in fact creating fear among the parents and becoming a reason for child marriages arranged by parents. The increased access to mobile phones was seen as facilitating communication between girls and boys and contributing to self-initiated marriages. Parents felt that a runaway marriage by a daughter would bring shame to the family honour.¹⁰



Education, aspirations and child marriage

Several studies have shown an association between lower levels of education and higher levels of child marriage. While enrolment in primary schools is becoming increasingly common for girls in Bangladesh,¹¹ various factors including poverty lead to discontinuation of education. For instance, one of the fathers reported that he had to take his daughter out of school because she was needed to help with domestic chores including care of younger siblings. There were also cases of girls who were not interested in studying up to secondary levels and had voluntarily dropped out of school. In such cases, where a girl is not in school, she is more likely to be married as a child.

An important factor in motivating girls and their parents for her higher education is their aspirations. Many girls mentioned aspirations of becoming a teacher, or a nurse, or getting a job and becoming 'established' before getting married. Aspirations in turn are often a function of the exposure to possibilities and alternate roles for women.

"The eldest son of my eldest uncle is a marketing officer; one of my brothers is in the army. One of my sisters-in-law (wife of my brother) has studied a lot, she is also a teacher. Each and every one of my father's family is very much educated. We only are illiterate. All of the relatives of my father's house always come and visit my family. They always tell us not to get my daughter married soon, rather tell us to continue the education of my daughter. They tell us that will be a mistake if I get my daughter married at early age."

(Mother of role model, Koimari village, Nilphamari)

While girls from poorer families are likely to study less than girls from better off families, where the girls or parents have aspirations, girls continue with their studies despite strained financial circumstances.

"My father is educating me with hardship. My mother is sick; in the midst of such a situation they need to give me 50 taka everyday (for transportation). My father is fulfilling my dreams; I will also meet their needs after getting established."

(Role model aged over 18, West Moniram, Rangpur)

Social pressures for marriage are also less for a girl who is studying.

Moderator: "Do the neighbours say anything like, the girl is becoming old, why don't you marry her off, anything like that?"

Participant: "No, they are studying, that's why people do not have a headache about it. If they didn't study they would say."

(Mother of unmarried girl aged over 18, Nilphamari)

Thus, staying on in school and not marrying a daughter before she is an adult is a function of the values and attitudes of the girl and her family and their aspirations for her.

Among the respondents it was seen that some of the married girls were continuing with their studies even after getting married and among a few even after having a child. This suggests an increased value placed on education for girls and the willingness of marital families to allow daughters-in-law to continue with their studies.

Engagement in paid work and child marriage

We also tried to find out if engagement in paid work affected a girl's age at marriage. It is not uncommon for young unmarried girls to give tuition or take up sewing jobs to earn money to meet their own expenses and even to fund their education. Unmarried girls are also engaged in garment manufacturing units and domestic work. While there was no clear consensus on whether engagement in paid work led to a delay in a girl's marriage, responses suggest that if an unmarried girl is bringing an income into the family, there is less social pressure on the family regarding her marriage.

As some young boys said,

“If a girl is working and gets married late, it is seen as positive, but not if she marries late due to poverty.”

“For instance one of my cousin sisters is doing a job. She now gets a handsome salary and got married one year ago. She can be a role model. She got married after becoming (financially) independent.”

(Children's organisation boys, Nilphamari)

Especially if a daughter's contribution is a support to the family's finances, her marriage may be delayed. However, even in such cases, if the family finds a good groom, they will marry their daughter.

When a girl is engaged in paid work and is contributing to the family, her opinion carries more weight in the family and she is more likely to be consulted on all issues including those about her marriage.¹²

Awareness about child rights and child marriage

In this section, we present findings about the awareness of child marriage and related laws and the perceptions about its consequences on children among the different stakeholders.

Child rights, empowerment of children and child marriage

To explore the position of children in the family and the weight given to their opinions in the family, we asked children and parents about their role in family decision making. There was a high degree of variation in the responses. In some cases, it was felt that girls cannot express their opinions about issues like marriage, particularly to their fathers, who are the main decision makers about marriage. Even among boys, it was felt that it was easier for them to share their view with their mothers and sisters-in-law. However, if an unmarried daughter is educated or is earning an income, parents are more open to considering her views. The concept of children as having rights was not generally seen in the interviews, though children and parents who had participated in Plan's programmes did talk about the concept of child rights and discussions around it in group meetings.

A woman who was a member of a Village Development Committee noted that being a member of the committee she had learned that one should not talk rudely to children but treat them with affection.¹³ Similarly, members of a community-based organisation reported changing perceptions and norms about child rights and child participation as a result of their interaction with Plan and its partners.

Rani (Second left) was married at age 11 which was made possible because her ID card was doctored to say she was 18. She and her husband started trying for a baby immediately but it took seven years for her to fall pregnant. Due to birth complications, Rani passed out for two days. She had to undergo blood transfusions due to massive blood loss during delivery.



Plan / Bernice Wong

Participant 5: *“In the past if a child would come to this type of meeting we would chase him/her away, but now we do not do this. The child also has a position in the society.”*

Participant 3: *“Now this does not happen, now they are given their rights. Many of us understand this and the children also understand that they also have some rights to speak (in such a meeting).”*

(Community-based organisation members, Nilphamari)

Plan’s child-centred approach has influenced the thinking of local officials and made them appreciate the importance of including children in efforts for social change.

“At first many of the people used to think that Plan works against Islam but now everyone knows that Plan’s first priority is children, they want to make the future generation bright by working with the children. Gora valo holey gach er aga emnitei valo hobey. (If the base is strong then the top of the tree will be naturally strong.)”

(Local government chairman, Gazipur)

Children too are beginning to become aware of their rights.

“I have understood that I should not get married now. I have got some ideas about my rights. I have knowledge about what I can do and what I cannot. In this way what we have learnt from the children organisation has become effective for us. I now know it myself and have also informed others.”

(Children’s organisation members, Nilpamari)

Awareness about child marriage and its consequences

There was widespread awareness about the fact that child marriages were detrimental for girls.¹⁴ The most common adverse consequence that was reported was poor health due to early child bearing. Some of the respondents also felt that girls who were married as children were unable to manage relationships in the marital home; others felt that early marriage led to the stopping of education.

Clearly in the areas where Plan works, there is widespread awareness about the organisation and its efforts at creating awareness about the ill effects of child marriages. As one mother of a young woman told us,



Plan

“Plan works with issues related to child marriage, education and every month they arrange a meeting with parents and teachers... For example, now I say that I would not marry off my daughter at an early age, this is one of the results of the programmes of those organisations. Apart from this the domestic violence of beating wives has also reduced a lot in this area... They arrange meeting with parents and teachers against child marriage. Arrange cultural functions like short play against child marriage and stage those with the help of the children and show it to all to make them aware.”

(Mother of unmarried girl under 18, Gazipur)

Even children who were not members of the children’s organisations in Plan’s area of work were aware of the child rights message of Plan.

“With the member of child group of Plan brothers and sisters of CWFD¹⁵ arranges several drama, dance, music etc. Child group works on the right of children. Getting married at the appropriate age is the right of each and every child. Girls who were”

(Not members of any children’s organisation, Nilphamari)

Plan’s work in the community is recognised by community leaders like the union parishad chairman in Gazipur district, who felt that the house to house outreach by Plan is something that the government would not be able to do.¹⁶

Awareness about child marriage is also spread through Plan’s partnership with local government institutions to identify and celebrate child marriage-free villages and unions. There is recognition within Plan and the community that a child marriage-free village or union may not remain so if there is any case of early marriage. However, such efforts give visibility to the issue of child marriage and demonstrate publicly the importance of changing norms around marriage.

Awareness about laws against child marriage

There is widespread awareness about the legal age of marriage among both children and adults in the community, and that child marriages can be penalised. However, there is negligible knowledge about the penalties. This may be in part due to the fact that the law is weak in its implementation. Respondents felt that law implementation about child marriage was weak and that the concerned officials were willing to bend the laws. Also, preventing a marriage that has been arranged can cause loss of finances and social status to the concerned family; consequently community members are reluctant to inform the authorities even if they know of a case. If a family fears that a child marriage in their family may be stopped, they may even conduct the marriage secretly.

Moderator: *“There are laws about child marriage then why child marriage is still taking place?”*

Respondent: *“What is there if there is law? We do not see the laws working. Till now I have not seen the police to arrest anyone because of child marriage. So, people are not scared of the law.”*

Moderator: *“What is the reason why law and police are not taking any step?”*

Respondent: *“No one informs the police. When a poor father is able to arrange his daughter’s marriage, people know about it, that’s why they do not inform. If anything happens in the family they do not inform police rather they try to solve themselves.”*

(Married girl aged under 18, Gazipur)

Prevention of child marriage

We talked to various stakeholders about what they felt could be done to prevent child marriages from happening. We also tried to find out about actual cases where child marriages had been successfully prevented from happening.

Perceptions of different stakeholders

Community leaders and government officials felt that people’s attitudes were changing toward child marriage and that there were fewer child marriages than before. Government officials who were interviewed felt that elimination of child marriage required greater awareness-raising in the community. They also felt that there was a need to reduce poverty by increasing employment opportunities and social security, as poverty was often associated with child marriage. A third factor mentioned was the need for increased coordination between government and non-government organisations to have a meaningful impact on this issue.

“Well, I will again say that different government, non-government and social organisations have to take the joint initiative. Advocacy is a big issue, to aware the people that in child marriage there is possibility of risk and how it is beneficial if it is not done, all these issues have to be promoted and informed, this is the big thing. Many people do not know what is child marriage and at what age a girl can be married off, what the problem is there if a girl aged 14/15 years is married off, actually they do not know all these.”

(Officer in charge, Upazilla police station, Bangladesh)

While parents and young people also felt the need for increased awareness about the ills of child marriage in the community, they also shared the difficulties in preventing a child marriage once it had been arranged. In some cases, the family conducted a child marriage clandestinely. Then there were cases where the marriages happened with the connivance of law enforcement officials. Community members felt that if there was stricter law enforcement, there would be a decrease in child marriages.

Role of children in child marriage prevention

Child marriages of girls typically happen because of the parents’ desire to marry their daughter early. The male family members are the main decision makers and the girl is usually unable to assert herself against them. Children can prevent child marriages in two ways. First, individual children can resist such a marriage if the family is arranging one for them. Second, children as a group, such as the children’s organisations promoted by Plan, can put pressure on a family that is arranging a child marriage.

There were a few cases where the girl herself resisted the pressure from her parents and convinced them to delay her marriage. In such cases, the determination of the girl not to marry early was a critical factor in preventing her marriage.

“Earlier my father also wanted me to marry at a young age. My parents tried to marry me off several times before I became 18. But I was determined. When the groom’s side would come to see me, I never used to stay at home. I hid somewhere else... When it happened several times, my father asked me why I was doing this. Then I made my father understand what can happen to a girl if she is married at a young age. And I also told my father that I want to study, I want to get established on my own. After that my father understood. He does not try now to marry me off. He tells everyone that I will marry my daughter off after she passes the BA.”

(Unmarried girl aged under 18, West Moniram Rangpur)

While cases of resistance to parental wishes for an early marriage were reported from both Plan and non-Plan areas, children’s organisations promoted by Plan have been effective in helping children become more confident about expressing themselves to their parents. There is evidence that where a girl has the support of a children’s organisation, she has drawn on its support and its organisers to oppose her parents.

Participant: “My daughter was only 12, 13 years at that time. We had almost fixed her marriage. Then my daughter made us understand that it will not be good and there are many negative consequences of early marriage.”



Moderator: “What did your daughter tell you?”

Participant: “She told us that she herself tells people not to do child marriage and it won’t be right if we do child marriage of her.”

Moderator: “Did you stop marriage according to her explanation?”

Participant: No, she cried a lot but we did not agree then to stop her marriage. Then she told it to her organisation, then Uttam Sir (who works in Plan Bangladesh) from her organisation came to make us understand. Then we decided to stop her marriage.”

Moderator: “Did this happen only once?”

Participant: “I actually looked for many proposals, but my daughter did not want to listen to any. But her uncle brought that particular proposal and he tried a lot to make this marriage happen. Then my daughter said that she should not do what her uncle says rather she should think of her own life.”

(Mother of role model, Nilphamari)

While there are a few cases of individual girls who have resisted an early marriage, we did not come across any cases where a children’s organisation as a group had succeeded in the prevention of a child marriage. There were cases reported where a children’s organisation had heard of an upcoming child marriage and had tried to persuade the girl’s family against it, but with little success. To the extent that the issue was taken up by the children indicates a level of awareness and ability to take up social action that merits continued support. Resistance to established norms around child marriage is best seen as a movement and recognition of forward strides is important.

“Near our school a marriage of a girl had been fixed with her cousin. That girl was underage. We held a meeting on that issue. The girl’s parents did not listen to us so we took the help of the village development committee. Along with them we tried to explain to the parents. But they did not understand, and gave their daughter in marriage.”

(Children’s organisation girl, Goshinga, Gazipur)

Arjina (in red) comes from one of the poorest villages in Nilphamari district. In most rural areas of Bangladesh like Nilphamari district, girls being married at the age of 15 are more like a norm. Thus, Arjina’s strong opposition to change her parents’ desire is not an easy approach.

The local children organisation members supported by Plan helped Arjina by convincing Arjina’s parent and coordinating with the village development committee. Now, Arjina studies in the university and is a big campaigner against child marriage in her community.



Role of community members and leaders in child marriage prevention

Plan promotes community-based organisations (CBOs) comprising adults and children who are supposed to play the role of change agents in the community. Plan also works with local leaders such as the union parishad chairman, teachers and religious leaders to build awareness about child marriage and encourages them to take an active role in preventing child marriage.

The data provides mixed evidence on the ability of CBOs and other leaders to prevent child marriage. In some cases, there is success.

“A few days back when the family of a madrasa (Islamic education institute) going girl was making preparations for her marriage, then her teacher informed her parents that there can be legal problems if she is married at such a young age. Later the parents decided to delay the marriage.”

(KII schoolteacher Mostafa Kamal, Goshinga, Gazipur)

CBOs, however, also report their limitations in preventing child marriages. Even an effective CBO may be unable to prevent a child marriage if the family is determined to go ahead with it. This gives an indication of the rootedness of the problem and the need for continued inputs to convert knowledge about the ills of child marriage into action.



Children put up posters to raise awareness of the practice of child marriage

Moderator: *“What are the activities against child marriage?”*

Participant 5: *“To increase awareness to stop child marriage. They are told that due to child marriage girls’ education and health will be hampered.”*

Participant 6: *“But if it doesn’t work then we are left with nothing to do.”*

Participant 5: *“They marry off their girls secretly.”*

Participant 3: *“If we can’t do it ourselves, then we complain to the chairman.”¹⁷*

Participant 1: *“Eighty per cent of our work has been successful.”*

Participant 3: *“Not 80 per cent rather 50 to 60 per cent of them have become successful.”*

Participant 6: “They do not do it with our knowledge.”

Participant 7: “They know we will take strong steps if we are informed.”

Participant 6: “There are examples of marrying off in another village and in the house of a kazi (marriage registrar).”

(Community-based organisations members, Nilphamari)

Community members also expressed their ambivalence about stopping a marriage when all the arrangements for the marriage had been made. Preventing a marriage from happening at this late stage would not only cause financial hardship to the concerned family, it would hurt the family’s honour and tarnish the girl’s reputation. If a girl’s marriage is broken off before it can be solemnised, it is invariably the girl and her family that are thought to be at fault. Not only are she and her family seen in poor light, it can become difficult to arrange her marriage a second time. This clearly indicates that the most effective stage to influence parents is when they are still exploring options and meeting potential grooms and before they settle matters and make arrangements for the marriage.

Role of the state in preventing child marriage

In addition to awareness creation around the importance of eliminating child marriage, and putting laws in place, the national government has launched a national campaign for birth registrations. In 2004, the Bangladesh Birth Registration Act was amended and the law makes it necessary for a bride and groom to each have a birth certificate before their marriage can be registered. The state is also making efforts through TV and public awareness campaigns to spread the word about birth registration. Most respondents were aware that births should be registered, and newborn children are typically registered at birth. It is also becoming increasingly common for older children to get themselves registered and get birth certificates.

“I have been associated with Plan, I knew since then. Earlier there was no birth registration in every house; Plan Bangladesh has helped to do it.”

(Unmarried girl aged over 18, Nilphamari)

Recently, the national government has introduced a centrally managed online birth registration system, which prevents tampering with birth dates once they are entered by government staff. Plan is supporting the government in its efforts to institute online birth registration which precludes manipulation as the data is computerised and maintained centrally. This is expected to address the issuance of false birth certificates.

Role models: Cases of positive deviance

The initial research design required interviews with four girls who could be role models and two parents who could be seen as role models; only two girl role models and one parent role model was identified during the study. The criteria for being a role model was that the girl or the parent take a stand against child marriage in the face of odds and are perceived as examples of persons who delayed marriages in the face of social pressures. The fact that it was difficult to identify such cases indicates that it is uncommon for individuals to take a stand against child marriage. In this section we briefly look at the factors that helped these individuals resist social norms.

Case 1: DR had just enrolled in class IX when her parents tried to arrange her marriage. DR was a member of a children’s organisation and had been engaged in development activities in the village. The members of the CO met regularly at a space in the village to read, discuss and play board games. The group was also trained to give performances on social issues in the community. DR was sure she did not want to get married before she had completed secondary education. She told her parents that she did not want to get married and when they did not listen, she sought the help of the CO’s coordinator. At his suggestion she shaved her head as a way of dissuading potential suitors. Seeing her determination her parents finally agreed to delay her marriage. She got married at the age of 21 because she felt that it was difficult for her to oppose her parents further. Her parents however did not have to give a dowry to her in-laws. She is currently enrolled in a degree programme and is working in a local non-government organisation.

Case 2: S is 19 years old and studying in her second year of college. She is the first, and so far, only girl in her village to study in college. She feels she is a burden on her parents because they have to spend money on her education and transportation even under strained financial circumstances. In her words, “My father is educating me with hardship. My mother is sick and in the midst of such a situation they need to give me 50 taka every day. My father is fulfilling my dreams...” Initially both, her parents wanted to marry her before she was 18 years old.



“My parents tried to marry me off several times before I became 18. But I was determined. Whenever the groom’s side came to see then I would never stay at home and hid somewhere. When it happened several times, my father once asked me why I was doing this. Then I made my father understood what can happen to a girl if she is married at a young age. And I also told my father that I want to study, and get established on my own. After that my father understood. He does not try now to marry me off. He tells everyone that I will marry my daughter off after she passes the BA.”

Case 3: F has a small family of two sons and one daughter. Her daughter B is 17 years old and in school. The daughter does not receive any scholarship and the cost of her education is borne by her parents. Initially F said they had tried to find a groom for her daughter when she was 12 or 13 years old, “because the neighbours said that there is no benefit in educating a girl” but her daughter cried and told them that they were making a mistake. One time an uncle brought a proposal and put a lot of pressure on the family, but B was determined about not getting married. B is a member of a children’s organisation and does not intend to marry before she completes high school. She has taken the help of the children’s organisation to oppose her parents when they have tried to get her married. F says that they will marry B once she finishes school and she can complete college after getting married. F is confident that her daughter will be able to continue studying even after getting married because “she is very strong and she herself wants to study”. She however does not want to delay her marriage till she completes college because she feels it is not possible to get a good match if a girl’s marriage is delayed beyond a point. F wants to marry her daughter by the time she is 21 years old.

A striking lesson that emerges from these three cases of positive deviance is the determination of the girl to not marry before she is 18 and has completed at least high school. In places where there is a children’s organisation to support the girl, she has used that resource.

Effectiveness of Plan’s interventions

Plan Bangladesh has a strong focus on child marriage, and works in various ways with children, adults, local leaders and government officers to raise awareness in communities.

Plan follows a child and community-centred approach and establishes links with community leaders. Given its objective to change social norms around the issue of child marriage, it is critical that it get the buy-in from community leaders. Plan’s presence in the community is recognised by the local leaders, who are appreciative of the outreach made possible with Plan’s efforts.

“The things which Plan is doing to prevent child marriage, I think the government cannot do it in the same way, not even me. They make a list of everyone and go from house to house. I have also stopped child marriage with their help.”

(Local government chairman, Gazipur)



Plan's work with teachers is especially important because of the position they occupy in the community. Children tend to look up to their teachers and in several interviews girls mentioned that their role model was a teacher in their school. Teachers thus have a great potential to challenge traditional norms around early marriage.

“Actually, Plan Bangladesh has been working here for a long time... At present many of the parents are thinking to let their girls to study up to Secondary School Certificate since there are opportunities to do job as a teacher in primary schools. The sanitation-related activities that Plan is doing has brought long-term positive impact in the area. There was not this situation five years back, and people used to defecate in open places. The women of the village are aware about this. I have got few extra teachers because of the school improvement programme (SIP) who are assisting in extending education programme of the school.”

(School teacher, Gazipur)

Plan promotes children's organisations for children aged 11 to 17 and provides broad-based inputs to children on health, social problems such as dowry and child marriage, health and sanitation. They also promote negotiation skills through life-skills training and build their capacities for social action.

Moderator: *“Have you ever participated in any activity of the Children's Organisation?”*

Respondent: *“One month back I went to attend a programme as a member of the Children's Organisation. There was a training arranged by Plan in Latifpur. Many questions were asked and those who stood first, second and third giving answer to questions, they gave books to them as award. Apart from this they also discussed about smoking, child marriage, sanitation, dowry etc.”*

Moderator: *“Did you learn something new by participating there?”*

Respondent: *“I have learned many new things. I came to know about laws against child marriage from there.”*

(Unmarried girl aged under 18, Nijkhujekhani, Gazipur)



Plan / Bernice Wong

The significant presence of Plan and other civil society organisations in the community has opened up new avenues for young women that help them explore new opportunities and alternative roles. As one young woman told us,

“Now many girls facilitate Plan-supported SBK as community teachers [Shishu Bikash Kendra, early-learning community-based centres where children three to five years old are taught]; SIP school (School Improvement Programme), CWDF (Concerned Women for Family Development, partner NGO of Plan which works on health and family planning). Many also work in BRAC (NGO) school.”

(Unmarried girl aged over 18, Nilphamari)

Working in these institutions not only introduces women to alternate roles and opportunities, it also influences her thinking, increases her confidence and provides her with negotiation skills to make decisions in her favour. It also raises girls’ aspirations for a future beyond marriage by providing them with other options that improve their standing in society.

If the girl works in CWDF then she surely knows what might happen if she gets married before 18 years. Then she makes her parents understand the consequence of getting married before the age of 18, it does not matter whether the proposal is good or bad. She can obviously prevent her marriage if she can make her parents understand the disadvantages of early marriages. If the girl does not work in CWDF and is uneducated then she cannot make her guardians understand the fact.

(Children’s Organisation members, Nilphamari)

Conclusions

Child marriage is a deep-rooted practice supported by strong social norms. The median age at marriage for girls in Bangladesh, which was 16 years in 2004, has risen to just 16.6 in the last decade, and the majority of girls in Bangladesh get married before they turn 18 years old. Traditional norms and community pressure are the primary drivers, and there are some cases where children themselves initiate marriages, with or without parental consent. The incidence of child marriages is greater in poorer families and those with lower levels of education. While the family's financial standing is an important factor in determining a girl's education, also important are the aspirations that she and her family have for her. Where parents and the girl herself have aspirations for her future, they are more likely to support her education and delay her marriage, even in the face of financial hardship.

There is widespread awareness in rural areas about the legal age of marriage and the adverse consequences of child marriage, particularly for the health of girls. Child marriage however is not perceived as being a violation of child rights. In fact there is very limited awareness about the concept of child rights, though parents, children and even local leaders who have been associated with civil society organisations like Plan do have some understanding about it.



Plan / Bernice Wong

Preventing child marriages once they are arranged is a major challenge. Perhaps because few child marriages are in fact prevented once they are arranged, there is hardly any knowledge about the penalties for persons arranging a child marriage. It is felt that child marriages can be prevented if people are made more aware of the ill-consequences of such marriages, and if there was stricter law enforcement. While community leaders like teachers are sometimes able to convince parents against marrying their daughters early, community-based organisations of children and adults expressed their inability to actually prevent child marriages once these had been arranged.

There are instances where child marriages have been prevented; in such instances the girls themselves have shown determination to avoid being married early. In areas where Plan is working, these young women have taken the support of children's organisations promoted by Plan to assert themselves against their families. Plan Bangladesh's approach of working simultaneously with the community, the local leaders and the state is the required strategy for stemming child marriages. Empowering children through increased knowledge, awareness of their rights and better abilities to negotiate and communicate can make a significant dent in child marriage rates. Also important is showcasing alternative gender roles and creating aspirations so that parents and children expand their thinking about possibilities for women.





Endnotes

- 1 UNICEF (2011). State of the World's Children 2011.
- 2 ICDDR,B and Plan Bangladesh (2012). Child Marriage in Bangladesh: Findings from a National Survey. Bangladesh, Plan Bangladesh. [unpublished]
- 3 Bangladesh DHS 2004, 2007, 2011
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Plan Bangladesh. Bangladesh Country Strategic Plan: July 2010-June 2015.
- 6 ICDDR,B, & and Plan Bangladesh (2012). Child Marriage in Bangladesh: Findings from a National Survey. Bangladesh, Plan Bangladesh. [unpublished]
- 7 The criterion for selection of role models was persons who had successfully prevented a child marriage in the face of adverse circumstances.
- 8 Stipends and scholarships for girls in Bangladesh have led to more girls being in school, but there continue to be other costs, such as transportation and extra tuition, that make it harder for poorer families.
- 9 The prevalence of self-initiated marriages is difficult to ascertain from the current qualitative study.
- 10 Of the six cases of girls married before age 18 interviewed for this study, one of the girls said that she had wanted to marry her cousin and the parents on both sides had consented. She got married at age 15.
- 11 Eighty-six per cent of girls enrol in primary school, according to State of the Child Report, 2007, UNICEF
- 12 A recent study by ICDDR,B, finds that employment at time of marriage was associated with lower rates of child marriage.
- 13 IDI married girl (above 18), Nilphamari
- 14 The government and other civil society organisations are also working on the issue of raising awareness and preventing the occurrence of child marriage. In this section we report findings where respondents specifically mentioned Plan's activities or inputs.
- 15 Concerned Women for Family Development (CWFD) is an NGO that partners with Plan Bangladesh for programme implementation.
- 16 KII with Union Parishad Chairman Gazipur
- 17 The chairman here refers to the chairman of the union parishad or council, which is the smallest rural administrative and local government unit in Bangladesh. The chairman heads the elected 13-member body of representatives.

“Earlier my father also wanted me to marry at a young age. My parents tried to marry me off several times before I became 18. But I was determined. When the groom’s side would come to see me, I never used to stay at home. I hid somewhere else... When it happened several times, my father asked me why I was doing this. Then I made my father understand what can happen to a girl if she is married at a young age. And I also told my father that I want to study, I want to get established on my own. After that my father understood. He does not try now to marry me off..”

Unmarried girl aged under 18, West Moniram Rangpur



Plan



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