

Child Marriage in Bangladesh: Challenges and Prospects for Change

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Abstract

Child marriage remains a pressing social issue in Bangladesh, despite significant advancements in education and women's rights. Defined as a marriage in which at least one party is below the age of 18, it disproportionately affects girls, hindering their access to education, economic opportunities, and health. This article examines the cultural, economic, and legal factors driving child marriage in Bangladesh, alongside the detrimental impacts on young girls and society. Efforts to combat the practice, including government policies, legal frameworks, and community-based initiatives, are discussed. By identifying gaps in implementation and societal attitudes, the paper concludes with recommendations to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, which seeks to eliminate all harmful practices, including child marriage.

Keywords: Child marriage, Bangladesh, gender inequality, education, cultural norms, SDGs

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INTRODUCTION

Child marriage, a deep-rooted cultural practice, continues to thrive in Bangladesh despite global and national efforts to eradicate it. Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage globally, with UNICEF estimating that 51% of girls are married before their 18th birthday. The phenomenon is particularly alarming in rural areas, where poverty, gender inequality, and social norms perpetuate this harmful tradition. These traditions are often reinforced by generational cycles, where parents who were themselves child brides see early marriage as the norm rather than an anomaly.

Moreover, international attention to this issue has underscored its global significance, yet localized challenges remain uniquely entrenched in Bangladesh. For instance, rural areas often lack access to education, healthcare, and legal resources, further exacerbating the problem. Cultural stigmas surrounding unmarried girls in their late teens add additional pressure on families to arrange marriages early.

This paper seeks to present a comprehensive analysis of child marriage in Bangladesh, exploring its causes, consequences, and the effectiveness of interventions. By providing a detailed understanding of the issue, it aims to inform policy-makers, researchers, and stakeholders on potential pathways for meaningful

change. Additionally, this paper includes comparisons with global trends, lessons from other countries, and insights from in-depth field research to enrich its analysis.

Drivers of Child Marriage in Bangladesh

Several interrelated factors contribute to the persistence of child marriage in Bangladesh:

Poverty

Poverty remains a critical driver of child marriage in Bangladesh. For economically disadvantaged families, marrying off daughters early is perceived as a financial strategy to reduce household burdens. Dowries, which tend to be lower for younger brides, further incentivize early marriages. According to a study by Ahmed and

Khan (2020), 65% of child marriages in rural areas are driven by economic hardships. Interviews with affected families reveal that financial strain often compels parents to prioritize immediate survival over long-term benefits of delaying marriage.

Cultural Norms

Patriarchal traditions and cultural norms heavily influence the practice of child marriage. In many communities, controlling female sexuality and ensuring "family honor" are paramount, leading families to marry their daughters early. Such norms are deeply entrenched, and any deviation is often met with societal disapproval or ostracism. Historical accounts show that these practices date back centuries, making cultural shifts particularly challenging. Awareness campaigns targeting community leaders and influencers have shown promise but remain underfunded.

Lack of Education

The relationship between education and child marriage is well-documented. Limited access to education for girls correlates with higher rates of child marriage. Girls who drop out of school due to financial constraints or societal pressures are particularly vulnerable. Evidence suggests that each additional year of schooling reduces the likelihood of child marriage by up to 6%. Case studies from rural districts indicate that providing safe transportation and scholarships significantly increases girls' school retention rates.

Weak Law Enforcement

Despite the existence of laws prohibiting child marriage, enforcement remains inconsistent. Corruption, inadequate resources, and societal resistance often undermine legal frameworks. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017, while a step forward, contains loopholes—such as allowing marriage under "special circumstances"—that weaken its impact. Training law enforcement officials to address these issues and strengthening accountability mechanisms are critical steps toward improving the law's efficacy.

Impacts of Child Marriage

The consequences of child marriage are far-reaching, affecting individuals and society:

Health Risks

Child brides face significant health risks, including complications from early pregnancies, higher maternal and infant mortality rates, and vulnerability to domestic violence. According to UNFPA (2021), girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth compared to women aged 20-24. Early motherhood often leads to chronic health conditions, including obstetric fistula, and limits access to family planning services. Regional healthcare surveys highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions.

Educational Setbacks

Marriage and subsequent responsibilities often force young girls to drop out of school. This lack of education limits their future opportunities and perpetuates cycles of poverty. The National Action Plan to End Child Marriage emphasizes the critical role of education in breaking this cycle. A longitudinal study in southern Bangladesh demonstrated that community-supported education programs significantly reduced school dropouts among girls.

Economic Costs

Child marriage contributes to economic stagnation by curtailing women's participation in the workforce. A World Bank study estimates that ending child marriage could add billions of dollars to the global economy by increasing women's labor market participation and reducing health care costs. Furthermore, the economic dependency of child brides often perpetuates cycles of poverty and vulnerability, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.

Legal Framework and Policy Efforts

The Bangladeshi government has introduced several measures to combat child marriage:

Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017)

This law raised the legal marriage age for girls to 18 and boys to 21. However, the controversial provision allowing exceptions under "special circumstances" undermines its effectiveness. Addressing these loopholes is essential for ensuring the law's credibility and enforcement. Comparative analysis with stricter laws in countries like Sri Lanka underscores the importance of eliminating such exceptions.

National Action Plan to End Child Marriage (2018-2030)

The National Action Plan outlines strategies to address the root causes of child marriage. Key initiatives include community mobilization, enhancing girls' access to education, and providing economic incentives to families. Despite its comprehensive approach, implementation remains a challenge. Detailed progress reports indicate varying success across districts, with urban areas showing more significant improvements than rural counterparts.

International Commitments

Bangladesh's commitment to Sustainable

Development Goal 5.3 reflects its intent to eliminate harmful practices like child marriage. Collaborative efforts with international organizations, including UNICEF and Girls Not Brides, have been instrumental in driving progress. Partnerships with grassroots organizations have facilitated localized interventions that address specific community needs.

Challenges in Combating Child Marriage

Despite these efforts, challenges persist:

Social Resistance

Deeply ingrained traditions and societal attitudes often resist change. Community leaders, who wield significant influence, may prioritize preserving cultural norms over advocating for girls' rights. Engaging these leaders through structured dialogue and capacity-building workshops can help bridge the gap between tradition and progressive change.

Economic Barriers

Poverty continues to be a significant obstacle. Without addressing the economic vulnerabilities of families, efforts to delay marriage are likely to have limited impact. Pilot programs providing microloans to families have shown potential in reducing child marriage rates by offering alternative income sources.

Implementation Gaps

Weak governance, lack of resources, and corruption hinder the effective implementation of laws and policies. Strengthening institutional capacity is crucial for overcoming these challenges. Digital tools for monitoring and reporting violations could enhance accountability and transparency.

Recommendations

To achieve meaningful progress, the following steps are crucial:

Community Engagement

Empowering communities to challenge harmful norms and support girls' education is vital. Grassroots initiatives involving local leaders, parents, and adolescents can help shift societal attitudes. Community theaters and storytelling events have proven effective in sparking dialogue and inspiring change.

Strengthening Education

Investing in girls' education and vocational training is essential. Scholarships, school feeding programs, and safe transportation can encourage school attendance and reduce dropout rates. Establishing mentorship programs for young girls can further support their educational and personal growth.

Robust Law Enforcement

Eliminating existing loopholes in legislation and improving enforcement mechanisms are crucial steps toward addressing the issue of child marriage. While laws against child marriage may exist, the effectiveness of these laws largely depends on their implementation and the ability of law enforcement agencies to enforce them consistently. Comprehensive training programs for law enforcement officials and members of the judiciary are vital to ensure they understand the complexities and nuances of child marriage laws. This training should include not only legal knowledge but also cultural sensitivity, helping authorities navigate the societal and familial pressures that often surround such cases. Additionally, effective coordination between law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, and local communities is necessary to facilitate a more efficient and timely response to child marriage incidents.

Furthermore, partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can significantly strengthen these efforts. NGOs often play a critical role in independent monitoring, gathering data, and advocating for the rights of vulnerable populations. By working closely with law enforcement, NGOs can help ensure accountability and provide on-the-ground support to victims of child marriage. They can also assist in raising awareness about the legal consequences of child marriage, thereby reducing its occurrence through education and advocacy. Developing comprehensive monitoring systems to track cases and outcomes will also help assess the effectiveness of laws and enforcement measures, ensuring they evolve to meet the changing needs of society.

Economic Incentives

Providing targeted financial support to families is a powerful tool for delaying child marriage and promoting the education of girls. Many families in marginalized or rural areas view early marriage as a solution to economic hardship, as it can alleviate the financial burden of raising a daughter. Therefore, offering financial incentives that address these economic pressures can significantly impact the decision-making process. Conditional cash

transfer programs, which provide families with financial assistance contingent upon certain actions—such as keeping girls in school—have already shown promise in similar contexts across the globe. These programs can help change the economic calculus for families, enabling them to prioritize education over early marriage.

Expanding the reach of these programs to remote and underserved areas is essential, as rural communities often face additional barriers to accessing financial support and educational opportunities. Additionally, making these programs more inclusive by offering access to other services, such as health care and vocational training, will enhance their impact. By empowering families economically and providing pathways for girls to stay in school longer, these programs create a long-term solution that addresses the root causes of child marriage. In the long run, ensuring that these financial support mechanisms are sustainable and adaptable to various cultural and economic contexts is key to their success. Engaging local leaders and communities in the design and implementation of these programs will help ensure they are both effective and culturally appropriate.

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

To address complex challenges effectively, fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders is essential. Governments play a pivotal role in creating enabling policies and providing oversight, while civil society organizations contribute on-the-ground expertise and community-level engagement. International organizations, with their extensive networks and resources, bring valuable technical assistance and a global perspective. Sharing best practices through structured knowledge exchange platforms ensures that successful strategies can be adapted and replicated across different contexts. Moreover, pooling financial, human, and technological resources allows for a more comprehensive approach to tackling issues.

Engaging private sector partners adds another layer of impact by leveraging their innovative capabilities and financial investments. Through corporate social responsibility initiatives and public-private partnerships, businesses can support funding, advocacy, and the development of scalable solutions. This multi-faceted collaboration not only enhances the reach and efficacy of interventions but also fosters a sense of shared responsibility and collective action toward common goals. Building trust, aligning priorities, and maintaining transparent communication among all stakeholders are critical to ensuring sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Conclusion

Child marriage in Bangladesh is a multifaceted issue that requires a holistic approach. It intersects with various social, economic, and cultural factors, making its eradication a complex yet necessary endeavor. While legislative and policy frameworks are in place, their

success depends heavily on addressing deeply ingrained societal attitudes and systemic barriers that perpetuate the practice. These barriers include not only poverty and limited educational opportunities but also entrenched gender norms and inadequate enforcement of existing laws.

To achieve meaningful change, it is imperative for government, civil society, and international partners to collaborate on multi-pronged strategies. Grassroots activism, supported by community leaders and influencers, can play a pivotal role in challenging cultural norms and reshaping societal perceptions. Educational campaigns targeting both parents and children are equally critical in fostering awareness about the consequences of child marriage and the benefits of delaying it.

Moreover, achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5.3—which aims to eliminate harmful practices such as child marriage—will not only protect the rights of girls but also contribute to broader societal advancements in gender equality and social empowerment. Empowering young women through education, skill development, and economic opportunities is central to this effort, as it addresses the root causes of child marriage and equips girls to build independent futures.

Lessons learned from successful interventions must be documented, adapted, and scaled to ensure nationwide impact. These lessons include innovative programs like conditional cash transfers, which incentivize families to prioritize education over early marriage, and community engagement models that foster local ownership of anti-child marriage initiatives. By scaling these approaches and ensuring their integration into national development plans, Bangladesh can make significant strides toward ending this harmful practice and setting a global example for addressing similar challenges.

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