

## Child marriage obstructs SDGs implementation

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Child marriage is defined as any formal marriage or informal union where one or both are under 18 years of age. The reason for raising the issue of child marriage in this column is that we consider it as a vice from socio-economic and human points of view. The reason is also that a law banning child marriage in Bangladesh is reported to be in the offing. However, the good news is overcast by a bad one of a 'special' consideration clause that allegedly makes a mockery of the good intention. Girls Not Brides, a global partnership of more than 650 civil society organisations, is committed to ending of child marriages and enabling girls to fulfil their potential. We can heavily draw upon their observations for a thought on this issue. Each year, globally, 15 million girls are 'guillotined' being married off before the age of 18. That is, 28 girls are married every minute and one in every two seconds. Reported, among top 20 countries of high incidence, the rate of child marriage is the highest in Niger (76 per cent); Bangladesh ranks 6th with 52 per cent and Cameroon the lowest with 38 per cent. However, in terms of the absolute number of children married, Bangladesh seems to rank second among top 20 with 3.9 million married off every year, and India tops the list with 30 million girls married under age 18. In other words, about 11,000 girls under 18 are married every day in Bangladesh.

The reasons for child marriage are various. First, at its heart, child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and the belief that girls and women are somehow inferior to boys and men. Second, child marriage is a complex issue. Poverty, lack of education, cultural practices, and insecurity fuel and sustain the practice. Second, as Girls not Brides argues, in many communities where child marriage is practiced, girls are not valued as much as boys; they are seen as a burden on their families. Marrying daughter at a young age can be viewed as a way to ease economic hardship by transferring this 'burden' to her husband's family. Fourth, child marriage is also driven by patriarchal values and the desire to control female sexuality, for instance, how a girl should behave, how she should dress, who she should be allowed to see, to marry, etc. Families closely guard their daughters' sexuality and virginity in order to protect the family honour. Girls, who have relationships or become pregnant outside marriage, are shamed for bringing dishonour to their families. Fifth, there is a cultural link. Child marriage is a traditional practice that happens in many places simply

because it has happened for generations. In some communities, when girls start to menstruate, they become women in the eyes of the community. Marriage is, therefore, the next step towards giving a girl her status as a wife and mother. Harmful traditional practices can be linked to each other. In southern Ethiopia, for instance, child marriage usually follows the practice of female genital mutilation/cutting, which is considered a rite of passage to womanhood. Sixth, more than half of girls from the poorest families in the developing world are married as children. Where poverty is acute, families and sometimes girls themselves believe that marriage will be a solution to having secure future. Giving a daughter in marriage allows parents to reduce family expenses by ensuring they have one less person to feed, clothe and educate. Families may also see investing in their son's education as more worthwhile one. In some cases, marriage of a daughter is a way to repay debts, manage disputes, or settle social, economic and political alliances. In communities where a dowry or 'bride price' is paid, it is often a welcome income for poor families; in those where the bride's family pays the groom a dowry, they often have to pay less money if the bride is young and uneducated. Finally, many parents marry their daughters off young because they feel it is in her best interest, often to ensure her safety in areas where girls are at high risk of harassment and physical or sexual assault. Child marriage can increase in humanitarian crises, such as in conflict or after a natural disaster. When families face even greater hardship, they may see child marriage as a coping mechanism in the face of poverty and violence. Eight out of the ten countries with the highest child marriage rates are considered fragile states.

"In recent years, child marriage has gained increasing prominence on international and national development agenda. Today, we have a unique opportunity to act on this momentum and accelerate our efforts to help change the lives of girls and young women all over the world. Ending child marriage requires work across all sectors and at all levels. It requires us to understand the complex drivers behind the practice in different contexts and adapt to our interventions accordingly."

Let's have a few words about the consequences of child marriage, as viewed by Girls not Brides. Child marriage violates girls' rights to health, education and opportunity. It exposes girls to violence throughout their lives, and traps them in a cycle of poverty. Child marriage directly hinders achievement of at least six of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Child brides face huge challenges as a result of being married as children. Isolated, often with their freedom curtailed, girls frequently feel disempowered and are deprived of their fundamental rights to health, education and safety.

"Neither physically nor emotionally ready to become wives and mothers, child brides are at greater risk of experiencing dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth, contracting HIV/AIDS and suffering domestic violence. With little access

to education and economic opportunities, they and their families are more likely to live in poverty".

Communities and nations also feel the impact: systems that undervalue the contribution and participation of girls and women limit their own possibilities for growth, stability and transformation. If we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and uphold the human rights of women and girls, we must act now to end child marriage. And that has to come from a clear political commitment and appropriate policies without 'ifs' and 'buts'.

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