

Position Paper

Child Marriage in Bangladesh: Background, Reasons, and Prevention Strategies

Photo: Students in a school in Brahmanbaria are taking an oath against child marriage.

Background

This position paper is based on the experience of 'National Thematic Forum (NTF)' members who are working to strengthen civil society and government accountability mechanisms in Bangladesh. The National Thematic Forum is an apex body and a theme-based platform for civil society and grass-roots/local organisations. It provides an opportunity for civil society representatives, government actors, and other stakeholders to engage in discussion and formulate recommendations exclusively dedicated to citizens' priorities in Bangladesh. Platforms for Dialogue (P4D) is providing capacity building supports to the Forum.

To prepare this position paper, the authors have reviewed several research papers on the child marriage issue and held conversations with the NTF members to outline the nature of the problem that persists, some practical solutions to the problem, and recommendations for different stakeholders regarding their roles to contribute to ending child marriage in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in the last 20 years to improve the lives of women and girls including the falling maternal mortality rate, reduced fertility rate, and increased gender parity in school enrolment. However, despite efforts made by both the government and NGOs to end child marriage, the rate is still high. Almost one in four girls get married before the age of 15 and nearly 59% get married before the age of 18 (NIPORT and ICF, 2019). Despite some efforts being made to end child marriage for children under the age of 15, Bangladesh ranks 1st in South Asia and 4th globally for the rate of child marriage (UNICEF, 2019). Furthermore, there has been no improvement over the past few years to end child marriage before the age of 18.

Conversely, the coronavirus pandemic has caused a sharp and steady increase in child marriage in Bangladesh. During the pandemic, the government was forced to impose frequent lockdowns during which various social awareness programs could not take place as they had been planned.

Therefore, social problems like child marriage rose among other issues. Growing concerns over joblessness, poverty, food scarcity, fear, and insecurity among parents due to the pandemic are responsible for this steady increase in child marriages.

Moreover, COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting the lives of girls. Pandemic-related travel restrictions and physical distancing make it difficult for girls to access health care, social services, and community support that protect them from child marriage, unwanted pregnancy, and gender-based violence. As schools remain closed, girls are more likely to drop out of school and not resume their education. Job losses and increased economic insecurity may also force families to marry off their daughters to ease financial burdens.

Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 aims to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations.” The Government of Bangladesh is seeking to eliminate child marriage by 2041. Hence, the National Plan of Action (NPA) to End Child Marriage has been launched by the government to eliminate child marriage through existing institutional initiatives, programs, and combined efforts of all.

These actions show clear institutional intention that stopping child marriage is a priority for both the government as well as the development partners in Bangladesh. It is widely recognised that ending or delaying child marriage preserves children’s childhood, secures their rights to education and lives, reduces their exposure to violence and exploitation and contributes to breaking the inter-generational cycle of poverty.

Hence, the NTF on child marriage is taking a stand to stop child marriage by scaling-up activities to bolster locals’ interest and understanding of the importance of child marriage issues to make a bigger impression at the community level.

Problems Related to Child Marriage

Child marriage has significant negative impacts – not only for girls but also for society as a whole. Marriage effectively ends schooling and prevents girls from achieving their full potential. Additionally, it increases the risk of early pregnancy which could lead to health complications and is correlated to higher-than-average maternal mortality (Murphy and Carr, 2007).

Additionally, child marriage is associated with increased total fertility. It is also closely linked with abuse, violence, sexual harassment, and unequal relationships.

Moreover, the death of girls aged 15–19 years is also noticeably related to pregnancy and delivery complications. Girls who expect children before the age of 15 are five times more likely to die of pregnancy-related causes compared to older mothers (Murphy and Carr, 2007). Recent studies highlight the fact that girls who marry early are also at an increased risk of gender-based violence (USAID, 2009).

Probable Causes of Child Marriage

The persistence of child marriage depends on multiple factors. From the review of literature, it is found that child marriage is mediated through respondents’ social characteristics (e.g., education, values, social norms, sense of security, cultural beliefs such as ensuring a girl’s virginity), economic factors (poverty, economic opportunities, employment), cultural characteristics (gender and cultural norms, religion) and other factors, such as physical insecurity, demand for marriages and dowry, and parents’ anxieties, for instance around chastity (Islam et al., 2016).

The BIDS (2019) study also confirms that child marriage is associated with multiple factors including: poverty, illiteracy and lack of awareness among parents, unemployment especially for the educated, threat to physical safety including the fear of being physically or mentally abused as well as protecting family dignity, parents’ fear of their children being engaged in love affairs and even getting married themselves at an early age, high demand for young girls for arranged marriage especially those with *bideshi patro* (better groom working abroad), fear of the increase in dowry demand as the girls get older, fear of not being able to marry off girls and young women before they become ‘too old’, traditional beliefs that getting married earlier is better especially among the poor and uneducated parents, and lack of effective enforcement of rules and regulations.

In addition, one of the NTF members from Bandarban district added that the number of earning members per family is insufficient in his area and most of the earners’ income is dependent on agricultural work. However, most residents do not have their own land, so employment and earning opportunities are limited.

In this circumstance, female family members are seen as a financial burden, and therefore, early marriage seems to be the best solution for the parents in this particular district.

Lack of education among parents is another main reason for child marriage. Parents who are uneducated and financially insolvent, do not want to educate their children. Poverty and parental apathy do not allow female child to be educated. Girls who are deprived of education become targets of child marriage, and most of the time, their uneducated parents force them to get married.

Members from the NTF found that most rural people consider it their duty to marry off their girls when they reach puberty or due to religious norms. As a result, laws regarding marriage are neglected in most cases. Child marriage is on the rise as the need for higher education is considered less important among poor families. However, this is not the case for educated families.

Child marriage has increased not only in rural areas but also in urban slum areas where poor and extremely poor families live. Many parents living in urban slum areas have to go to work while their children remain at home. Parents of such daughters decide to marry them off to wealthier families out of concern for social and economic security. In Brahmanbaria, an NTF member shared that the 13-year-old daughter of her maid has married off to an old-aged groom because of economic insecurity. Besides, there are several other contemptuous issues such as anxiety in parents from the thought of their female child engaging in love affairs and getting married without their parents' consent, the demand of young brides among immigrants seeking marriage, fear of a high dowry, poor law enforcement, giving children access to mobile phones, weak marriage registration system, fake age notarisation, and victims' own lack of awareness to raise their voice against child marriage are found to be the most common causes of child marriage at present.

In some of areas of Bangladesh, like in Natore, child marriage is considered a custom in the local community. There isn't adequate help or child safeguarding from the administration working to prevent child marriage.

A major cause of law enforcement agencies' inadequacy to fight against child marriage is their reluctance to act.

Additionally, law enforcement agencies have a poor track record of implementing rules and monitoring mechanisms for child marriage which is another reason why child marriage is still not under control.

Consequences for the Community

Child marriage has significant negative impacts not only on girls but also on a range of development outcomes. The negative effects of child marriage are early pregnancy, women's health hazards, and life risks, increasing population, family collusion and demoralization, violence against women, and an increasing divorce rate.

Early pregnancy, which is closely related to early marriage, could cause serious health problems and even death. Girls entering into marriage at a young age usually experience intense pressure to prove their fertility within the first year of their marriage. Compared to adult mothers, adolescent mothers are more likely to suffer from pregnancy-related complications with considerable health risks.

Child marriage damages the lives of girls and their families by destroying their free will, their right to think freely, and especially their own agency to make decisions regarding their own health and sexual well-being. Child marriage eliminates a girl's school life, means of being an earner, and narrows the possibility of being a contributor to her family and society. Without education, many married girls suffer from restricted personal, psychological, and cognitive development, and this takes away the opportunities for social interactions and gainful employment.

As a result of child marriage, there is a reduction in the supply of human resources in the labour market and economic development is being disrupted. Thus, child marriage kills off a lot of possibilities at its primal stage. Domestic violence from spouses and in-laws is more prevalent in cases of early marriage. Early marriage leads to low female labour force participation and impedes economic growth and development.

Marriages between a very young wife and an older husband tend to be less stable, more plagued with conflict and dissatisfaction, and more likely to result in divorce, widowhood, abandonment, or polygamy.

National Actions on Child Marriage elimination

The National Parliament of Bangladesh passed the 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) on February 27, 2017, which repealed and replaced the 1929 CMRA and strengthened penalties for child marriage. Also, the government has enacted the Rules of Child Marriage Restraint Act.

In addition to specific child marriage legislation, Bangladesh has also implemented a series of policies that relate to child marriage:

- **The National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage, 2018-2030 (NPA):** In 2018, the Government of Bangladesh adopted the NPA with the goal to end the marriage of girls under 15, reduce by one-third the rate of marriage for girls under 18 by 2021, and to completely eliminate child marriage by 2041 (NPA, 2017).
- **The National Children Policy, 2011 (NCP):** The NCP specifically recognises the right of all children to be protected from “violence, marriage, trafficking and forcing into commercial sex.” It also states that “discriminatory behavior toward female child shall be eliminated” (NCP, 2011).
- **The National Women’s Development Policy, 2011 (NWDP):** NWDP aims to ensure “stern enforcement legislation against minor matrimony, rape of a female child, abuse and repression” (NWSP, 2011).
- **The National Strategy for Adolescent Health 2017-2030 (NSAH):** The NSAH notes that the prevalence of child marriage and the corresponding high rate of adolescent pregnancy is a “significant concern.” One of the objectives of the NSAH is to “promote positive social norms” in order to address child marriage (NSAH, 2016).
- **The Population Policy, 2012:** The Population Policy, 2012 also calls for an Adolescent Welfare Program, which aims to encourage later marriage through information dissemination promoting such marriages, creating employment opportunities for unmarried women, and educating adolescents on health and life issues (PP, 2012).

The NTF Action to Eradicate Child Marriage

Members of the NTF are directly engaged with visible activities to prevent child marriage at the district level. The NTF supports local administration to form Child Marriage Prevention Committee in their working areas.

In the last three years, a total of 278 child marriages have been stopped in Natore as shared by one NTF member. 200 child marriages have been stopped by calling the hotline number to prevent child marriage posted on the billboards placed across Natore’s Gurdaspur Upazila. In addition, 78 more have been stopped due to the Upazila administration’s effort to combine the hotline’s operation and 999 campaign. Also, the district administrator took responsibility to ensure girls’ primary and secondary education and put a stop to marriage, especially for those who come from financially insolvent families. Each month, the district administration visits the schools to monitor the rate of child marriage.

In Moulvibazar and Brahmanbaria, school-based committees have been formed consisting of school students and teachers, which are playing an effective role in taking quick actions against child marriage. Awareness billboards have been placed at various places to prevent child marriage in Kochua of Bagerhat District.

In Nilphamari, courtyard meetings are being held with local people. NGOs are also taking necessary steps to prevent child marriage. In some districts, union chairmen are also working effectively against child marriage.

Obstacles while Preventing Child Marriage

It is evident that child marriage has always been a huge obstacle to development for countries like Bangladesh. The NTF members shared their experiences and reported that they have faced several difficulties while working at the grass-root level. These include lack of local representation, non-cooperation and administrative apathy, lack of proper law enforcement, birth certificate falsification, traditional marriages not being registered legally, political influences, dishonesty for the sake of bribes, the influence of local customs on child marriage, and the lack of security provided to people who are working to stop child marriage.

Possible and Practical Solutions to Overcome the Problem

Policy Alternatives

Ending child marriage requires multifaceted and mutually reinforcing strategies and actions. The important policy alternatives in this respect are as follows:

1. Activation of child marriage prevention committees: For the prevention of child marriage, the government may activate the Child Marriage Prevention Committees (CMPC) at the national, district, Upazila, and union levels to successfully implement the NPA 2017 to eradicate child marriage. These committees should comprise of government officials, local representatives, non-government officials, and local leaders.

2. Strategies for collaboration and coordination among stakeholders: Need to develop and implement strategies to strengthen collaboration and coordination among stakeholders, such as central as well as local government organisations including law enforcement agencies, civil society organisations, UN agencies, and community-based organisations. Ending child marriage is a battle, and all the relevant stakeholders need to join together to make a lasting impact. Limited SAP experiences also suggest that when the relevant stakeholders work together, it produces better results. Coordination and collaboration are necessary to make awareness campaigns effective, stop child marriages, ensure the physical security of girls, and maintain social order

3. Revising the laws, rules, and regulations and enforcing them properly: There is a grey area regarding the legal age for the marriage of girls in Bangladesh. While it says that 18 years is the minimum age of marriage for girls, but there is a provision to have the exception (Child Marriage) under the special circumstances. Many child marriages are taking place abusing this special clause. Also, once marriages take place at the age of even below 18, marriages do not become nullify. Furthermore, obtaining fake birth certificates from local government bodies and hiding age in marriage registration is also quite common in many areas. It is therefore important to make the necessary amendments to the laws, rules, and regulations regarding child marriage and enforcement.

4. Improve law and order situation and the social order in every community: Physical security and the threat of violence against girls are also among the important concerns of many parents that lead

them to marry their daughters off at an early age. It is therefore very important to improve law-and-order and social order in every community so that both the girls and the parents feel safe wherever they go. Violence against girls of any kind must also be ended. Local government, local administration, law enforcement agencies, local leaders, and influential civil society members, involving young change-makers, need to be involved in such an endeavour.

5. Provide skill-based educational opportunities for girls and ensure that schools are girl-friendly:

Education is an important driver of reducing child marriage. We need to ensure all girls come to school and help girls complete higher secondary education. In order to make that happen, in addition to improving parental awareness, schools should also be girl-friendly so that girls feel comfortable and welcome being in the schools.

6. Create employment opportunities for young women and enhance life skills program for girls:

Female labour force participation also contributes to delaying marriage. The possibility of educated women being employed in productive jobs also encourages many parents to send their daughters to school. It is also important to help girls and young women develop their social and technical skills and create more employment opportunities for young women, especially qualified and educated ones.

7. Awareness campaigns at the local level: Continue public awareness campaigns and activities for parents, teachers, local leaders, girls, and boys, and among prospective grooms. Despite the fact that there have been awareness-raising campaigns across the country about the harmful effects of child marriage and also the laws, rules, and regulations regarding the legal marriage age, the experiences of P4D's Social Action Projects (SAP) point to the fact that a large section of people in different parts of the country is still not aware of the pitfalls of child marriage. It is therefore important to continue awareness campaigns at the local level and with people in every community. SAP experience suggests that these awareness-raising campaigns work if done properly using multiple engagement methods and involving community members. However, while awareness campaigns are important, they are not sufficient on their own and need to be supplemented by other strategies.

8. Strengthening collaboration between government and non-government organisations to provide social security to reduce child marriage:

Household poverty is also considered one of the most important factors for child marriage. Daughters are still considered a burden in many poor families and that is one of the reasons why families try to marry their daughters off at early ages.

It is therefore important to provide those girls and their families with necessary social security so that they can refrain from engaging in child marriages. One way to mitigate this is to substantiate the collaboration between government and non-government organisations to devise strategies about how social security can be provided to reduce child marriage.

9. Working as a watchdog: One important action that the local civil society organisations can and should take is to work as a “watchdog body” to address issues related to child marriage at the local level. They can do it in collaboration with local government institutions and by involving young change-makers. They can work closely with parents, schools, religious leaders, local government representatives, local leaders, and local administration and law enforcement agencies.

Additionally, the NTF members who are working at the district level mentioned implementing the following strategies based on their experience that might help to reduce child marriage. These include online registration of marriage, issuance of digital birth certificates, cross-checking of birth certificate during the marriage ceremony, and discussions in religious meetings and courtyard sessions about child marriage to increase social awareness.

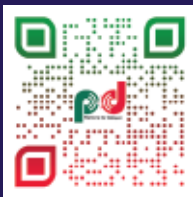
As already mentioned, ending child marriage is a battle, and no single strategy or agency can bring this practice to a stop alone. It needs a combined, concerted, and coordinated effort by all stakeholders. The following strategies have been proposed by the NTF to end child marriage in Bangladesh.

Policies/Strategies	Agencies/Organisations Responsible
• Awareness campaigns at the national and local level	MOWCA, Development agencies, and CSO
• Activation of Child Marriage prevention Committees following the Rules of Child Marriage Restraint Act 201	MOWCA and Local Administration
• Strategies for collaboration and coordination among stakeholders	LG, LA
• Revising the laws, rules, and regulations	CG, LG, LA, LEA
• Improve law and order situation and the social order in all communities	LG, LA, LEA, CSO
• Provide skill-based educational opportunities for girls and ensure that schools are girl-friendly	LG, LA, CSO, SMC, Parents
• Create employment opportunities for girls	CG, CSO, PS
• Strengthening collaboration between government and non-government organisations to provide social security to reduce child marriage	CG, LG, MOWCA
• Working as a watchdog	CSO and public representatives

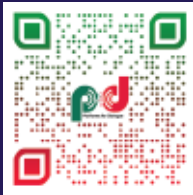
Note: CSO: Civil Society Organisation; LG: Local Government; LA: Local Administration; CG: Central Government; LEA: Law Enforcing Agency; SMC: School Management Committee; PS: Private Sector, MOWCA: Ministry of Women and Children Affairs

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