



steps in reducing child marriage through our work bangladesh case study

International standards and the dangers of child marriage

International law prohibiting gender discrimination requires that the age of marriage be the same for both women and men, and evolving international standards set 18 as the minimum age.

Universal international human rights obligations require countries to protect children and to “eradicate both through legislation and any other appropriate measures, all cultural or religious practices which jeopardise the freedom and well-being of female children”, including child marriage”¹.

International human rights standards also maintain that women must be guaranteed the same opportunities to access education as men. Because girls usually stop going to school once they are married, child marriage undermines this right. Also, by requiring children to take on adult roles and responsibilities before they are ready, child

marriage interferes with children’s rights to be children, to play and take part in “recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child”.²

In a recent open letter to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Kofi Annan describes the medical problems caused by child marriage:

“When girls marry as children, the impact on their health and that of their family is severe. Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death in girls aged 15 to 19 in low- and middle-income countries; 90 per cent of adolescent pregnancies take place within the context of marriage.

Where girls survive childbirth, they are at increased risk of injury and other complications: 65 per cent of all cases of obstetric fistula, for example, occur in girls under the age of 18.

Their children, too, are more vulnerable. Deaths among babies in their first few weeks of life are 50 per cent higher among those

¹ Human Rights Committee, ‘General Comment No. 28: (Article 3) The equality of rights between men and women’ (2000).

² CRC, Article 31.

born to mothers under 20 years of age than among those born to mothers in their 20s. Likewise, the risk of birth defects, as well as developmental delays and long-term disabilities related to low birth weight, are also higher for mothers under 20³.

Obstetric fistula which results in permanent incontinence is a condition surrounded by stigma. Dr Ferdousi Islam from Dhaka Medical College states that many of the thousands of young girls who develop this after labour are then cast aside by their husbands, or in rural areas, made to sleep in the shed with the cattle because of the smell.

Child marriage is a form of slavery, stealing childhood from girls and launching them into a cycle of poverty by taking away their chance of an education, which in turn means their parenting of their own daughters will often result in the same choices regarding early marriage.



This girl has been taken out of school by her parents to help her recently married sister look after her baby. The girl spends most days by the door of the school listening in. She says she wants to be back at school.



Legislation against child marriage in Bangladesh

Marriage under the age of 18 was made illegal in Bangladesh as far back as 1929, and reinforced again in 1984. Human Rights Watch reported that at the July 2014 Girl Summit in London, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina pledged to take steps to reduce, and ultimately end, child marriage in Bangladesh. She committed, by 2021, to end marriage for girls under age 15 and reduce by more than one-third the number of girls between ages 15 and 18 who marry. Bangladesh pledged to end all child marriage by 2041.

However media reports in October 2014 were saying the prime minister's cabinet was considering a revision to the law to make 16 the minimum age of marriage for girls. The minimum age for men would be 18. These revisions would reverse previous statements from the government about their aims to reduce child marriage among girls, hence Kofi Annan's response quoted above.

³ Adding his voice to the outcry in Bangladesh and the rest of the world, Kofi Annan addressed this open letter to Prime minister Sheikh Hasina in November 2014 to urge her to maintain the minimum age of marriage at 18 for girls. Lawmakers at this time were proposing to lower the age of marriage for girls from 18-16. The Prime Minister had previously pledged that her government would eradicate the practice. Fortunately by early 2015 there was a large push back from civil society and the bill was shelved.



A Working Child having a few hours of rest, education and play at our Community Schools in Cox's Bazar.

The situation 'on the ground' concerning child marriage in Bangladesh

Despite a minimum legal marriage age for women of 18, according to UNICEF, Bangladesh has the second-highest rate of child marriage in the world, second only to Niger, and the highest rate of marriage involving girls under the age of 15⁴. Women in the poorest quintile are 2.5 times more likely to marry in childhood than those living in the wealthiest quintile. Around 74 percent of Bangladeshi women currently aged 20 to 49 were married or in a union between the ages of 15 and 18.

The custom of child marriage is strongly ingrained so the legislation is widely ignored. Poverty and the perception of girls as a financial burden mean that many parents resort to giving away their daughters as young as possible. It is often considered that a young bride will give more years of servitude, and will be more obedient to their husbands. A child given away in marriage as young as 12 or 13 will not have to come with a dowry. As they grow older dowries have to be paid and the expense goes up with each year.

Children on the Edge projects in Bangladesh

Working with local partners MUKTI, Children on the Edge provides Community Schools for 900 working children in Cox's Bazar. Our work is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Consequently one of the many aims of our work we support in Bangladesh is focussing on ending child marriage.

The Community Schools are giving female working children the chance of an education they would otherwise be unable to access. This gives them a safe environment and prepares them for a potential transition to primary school.

With each school, time is dedicated to develop healthy teacher-parent relationships so that staff can encourage parents on the importance of education for their daughters and give training and support.

On a trip in November 2014 a series of qualitative interviews were undertaken with those involved in the projects in order to broaden our understanding of the quantitative information we had gathered, and to focus on hearing the human stories behind them.

One of the areas that emerged as significant was child marriage. In a recent survey we had done, 100 percent of parents said they did not think girls under 18 should get married. The statistics however, not just nationally but with the children we are working with, were indicating that many girls are being pulled out of education to marry.

Western Bangladesh has the worst rate of child marriage, but the eastern Chittagong region where we work, the rate is still 58%, with our local partner reporting that the rate in Cox's Bazar where the Community Schools are located, is 67%. More specifically, our partners had just gathered some statistics which were showing that 11-12 year old girls were disappearing from the registers.

⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, Ending Child Marriage: Progress and prospects, UNICEF, New York, 2014.



Qualitative Interviewing

In response to this information we held a discussion with a small group of mothers, whose children go to the Community Schools in Cox's Bazar. We needed to establish what was causing the disparity between opinions expressed regarding child marriage, and the common practice reflected in the quantitative statistics.

Was it that they felt they couldn't be candid about their real feelings on child marriage because of the national legislation? Was it because they needed greater awareness about the dangers of child marriage?

We described the situation to the mothers present and asked their opinion. Their first response was to talk about the difficulties of poverty and the financial crisis, but they then went on to talk about how their daughters are 'teased' if they are not married, and the conversation went on as follows:

- What do you mean by teasing, is it looked down on not to be married?

No, it's not that they are looked down on if they are not married. 'Teasing' means sexual advances, harassment, rape and kidnap. They are safe from this if they are married. In our country girls cannot earn, only boys can earn

so girls have to marry. Girls just have to produce children.

- So why has every person who responded to the survey stated that they think girls shouldn't get married under 18?

Because they shouldn't! We all know they shouldn't, but we have no choice.

- Does this upset you?

Yes, we know everything. We know what this means. We know that girls are too young for pregnancy and childbirth and it hurts them, we know they are not ready for family, we would want a different life for them, but we have no choice. We know all these things. We do not want this for our daughters.

- Did you get married under 18?

One lady is unmarried, the rest of us were married at 13, 17, 14, 13 and 16 years of age. This is also why we know it is not right.

- What can we do to change this?

The children have to have education to grade 10. Even if they do their grade 3 at the Community School and are ready for the primary school, we cannot afford the uniform and the books and the travel, so they cannot go.

Our response

In order to support the local community in Cox's Bazar to meet the international human rights standards with regards to the freedom and well being of female children, it is important to approach the issue from a rights perspective. This means ensuring that we are empowering the community themselves, and the girls themselves to have their voice heard and make a difference, being actors in their own futures, rather than recipients of aid.

Working with both duty bearers (i.e. national government, local government, community leaders) to and rights bearers (the children themselves) our response is as follows:

Working with Government

MUKTI are supporting the implementation of national laws, policies and protection systems that work to end child marriage, through advocacy channels. The work of the project also compliments a large-scale government programme being run in cooperation with IOM which works to combat child marriage. This is especially visible in cities like Cox's Bazar and has raised the profile of the issue significantly.

Parents and wider community.

It is clear from our interviewing that education and awareness about the dangers of child marriage have been effective, the issue is discussed regularly in Parents and teacher meetings and our staff have intervened this year to stop one early marriage happening. We will continue to build on these strong teacher-parent relationships to further support families in keeping their daughters in school.

To address the problem of 'Eve Teasing' described by the parents, staff from the project discuss the de-merits of the practice at each parents meeting. They go through the consequences of Eve Teasing and its relationship to child marriage and present examples from local newspaper cuttings.

MUKTI also supports community action groups, that are run by local people and

active in working to stop child marriage and teasing. Staff from the project have a good relationship with these groups and assist them in various ways.

Providing education beyond Grade 3

There is a big shift pending in the educational arrangement between the government and BRAC (whose curriculum we use in the schools). The government has recently requested that BRAC extend its education centres to cover learning through to Grade 5 allowing children to receive their General Primary Certificate (GPC). As our programme works towards following suit, it will keep young girls in our centres longer and provide a greater degree of protection from early marriage.

According to MUKTI, 3 out of 4 of the children who graduated from the community schools last year have continued their education in either a public or private school. To facilitate this, staff meet with children's parents to help arrange their enrolment in local schools. They also meet with local school principals to help pave the way for students to transition to new schools.



A voice for girls within the project

The team from the project focus on increasing the percentage of girls registered for school, and ensuring that the school themselves are child friendly places that are safe and empowering for girls. Our teachers go door to door in each slum to tell parents about the programme. Furthermore, announcements are made from the mosque speakers and at local community meetings.

Girl's leadership skills and awareness of their rights are being developed through general teaching on child rights and through their roles on the child committees, which enable children to have a voice into the way the schools are being run, and to advocate on behalf of their fellow students.



Encouraging girls to have their say about their own future

Find out more about the project in Cox's Bazar and our work with children living on the edge of their societies around the world, by visiting our website at www.childrenontheedge.org

