

Children Turned Into Brides

A STUDY OF THE PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

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Forced child marriage is a horrific practice that has deeply affected millions of girls worldwide, and this number only continues to be on the rise each day. An increase in child marriage rates has taken place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as support organizations and educational services are on lockdown. Nevertheless, the number of child marriages has been rapidly increasing for decades before the pandemic struck. In order to examine feasible solutions that could directly aim to eliminate child marriage and prevent this issue from escalating further, it is necessary to first investigate what causes child marriage to be so widespread and how damaging it is to force consent of marriage upon young girls.

Bangladesh has been recorded to have the highest incidences of child marriage in the world. According to UNICEF, Bangladesh has approximately 38 million child brides, and 13 million of these marriages occurred before the girl was able to reach age 15. Farah Chowdhury (2004) reported that in these types of Third World countries, girls are told to marry the men given to them “because such a suitable bridegroom might not turn up in the future” (248). In particular, if a family were facing financial difficulties and found a wealthy man of any age ready to marry, then their daughter would be forced to consent to marriage. According to the results of Chowdhury’s study, child marriages in Bangladesh are still quite common, and many families rely on this practice to survive and support themselves. Regarding the prevalence of early forced marriages, a statistical test conducted by Md Hossain (2015) revealed that 78.2% of Bangladeshi women were married as children, and 72.7% of those women were married by the age of 13 (5). The numbers from this data indicate that the marriages in Bangladesh are predominantly child marriages, and the rate at which this practice occurs has not slowed down in the past few years. Unless action is taken, it is difficult to imagine that this trend will change in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, Nahid Ferdousi (2014) claims that numerous girls have been

viewed as a source of economic hardship to their families, so they are forced to get married at an uncommonly young age (2). Many families truly believe that their daughters will be safer with a male guardian. Female child brides and their potential offspring suffer long-term consequences. Marriage at a young age can result in several “unplanned pregnancies and infant morbidity and mortality” (Kamal 38). This phenomenon can be detrimental to the health of the girls’ future children and to the probability of having healthy generations in the future. However, in 2016, UNICEF launched the Global Programme to End Child Marriage campaign. With the help of this project, hundreds of thousands of girls have realized their human and social rights, developed essential life skills, and gained access to education. Community conversations and academic campaigns were aimed at supporting young girls to combat child marriage. Nevertheless, it appears that these initiatives are insufficient; as of March 2021, there are nearly another 10 million girls at risk of being turned into brides due to the COVID-19 outbreak closing down schools and support agencies (“UNFPA-UNICEF Global”). Thus, implementing initiatives like providing free, informal education to young girls or even proposing a law to the parliament that only allows marriages to those 18 or older could help reduce the rate of forced child marriages in Bangladesh.

There are several reasons why this practice is so prevalent. Contrary to popular belief, child marriage is not linked to a religious tradition, nor is it linked to religion at all. There are cases of this phenomenon occurring in multiple countries around the world, regardless of religious beliefs. Islam and Hinduism are the most widely practiced religions in Bangladesh, in which supposed doctrines of these religions have been used as an excuse for imposing marriages upon children. Yet, neither Hinduism nor Islam has stated that child marriage is required, nor do they state that child marriage is forbidden. Therefore, it is evident that this issue is exclusively a

social norm, and since it has persisted for so long, most people have accepted it in these patriarchal societies. For centuries, men have viewed women as inferior to them, and this ideology has been passed down and taught for generations. While the inequality between men and women is not as severe as it was thousands of years ago, the notion that men are superior to women remains today in Bangladesh. If young boys were taught about gender inequality and its prevalence in their society as part of the school curriculum, the misogynistic attitudes that they normally possess as they mature will slowly begin to disappear. But as long as these damaging beliefs continue, gender inequality and oppression will continue to persist in Bangladeshi communities. By imposing marriage onto young girls, this patriarchal society imprints the concept into children that women must be dependent on their male partners for the rest of their lives.

Children are too young to possess the legal capacity to be sent to marriage; however, what generally occurs is that the father (the decision-maker/head of the family) coerces his daughter to marry, regardless of her wishes. Once married, husbands are allowed to exercise their authority by restricting their wife's freedoms (like showing themselves in public) to "safeguard family honor" (Offenhauer 60). Women are often constrained to household tasks, which prevents them from receiving an education or obtaining an occupation, worsening this problem and perpetuating this cycle of oppression for future generations. Forced marriages may also lead to prostitution and child trafficking rings. According to a woman named Papiya, who was captured by a sex trafficking ring in the Bangladeshi village of Kandipara, husbands can sell their wives off to brothels to earn money. In Papiya's situation, she was forced into marriage at the age of 12, and then sold off by her husband to a brothel in exchange for \$3500 (Redfern 10). Forced child marriage is just the beginning of putting women at risk and oppressing their rights;

it can lead to even worse issues, like human trafficking, as time goes by. Recently, the Bangladesh parliament passed a law called the 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act, which penalizes those responsible for child marriage but permits underage girls to marry under “special circumstances” with parental permission (Bangladesh, Jatiya Sangsad, Act No. 7). The government did not specify these circumstances, which has led people to exploit this loophole since there is also no minimum age for marriages to occur under these conditions. If the parliament enacted a law that raises the age of marriage to 18 years of age with no exceptions, young girls would not need to worry about their safety until they have fully matured into adults and are capable of consenting to marriage. Nonetheless, there has not been much done to change the gender imbalance as a consequence of the patriarchy's stranglehold over society, so women of all ages are unable to defend themselves or advocate for change without being put in danger.

However, not all cases of forced child marriages are motivated by the interest of men. In some Bangladeshi communities, family members are forced to resort to child marriage as a way to control the expenses of another mouth to feed and another education to pay for (Roy and Sarker 364). Sending their daughter off to marriage provides a family with just enough money to live on. Girls are not seen as valuable contributors to the household income; rather, they are considered to be an economic burden. The men in this society usually begin working immediately after leaving school, whereas women do mostly housework (Banks 1). Families might feel that there is no harm in marrying their daughter off earlier than expected, as she will be supported by her husband since he is the main source of income.

Most families see this as a solution to their financial difficulties and believe it can benefit both them and their daughters. Among the Rohingya, an Indo-Aryan group in a rural village in Bangladesh, they have stated that they send off their daughters to get married prematurely so that

the rest of the family can support themselves (Melnikas 19). Based on Andrea Melnikas' (2020) interviews conducted with members of this community, the idea of forcing girls into marriage and having children at a young age is deeply embedded within Rohingya families and shared by almost everyone within this group. It can be understood that this phenomenon cannot be too different from other areas of Bangladesh based on the fact that this particular group of people has not addressed this issue or taken action to eliminate it. These Bangladeshi communities also prioritize virginity before marriage, so girls are sent off to marriage to prevent premarital sex. According to the Bangladesh government, the purpose of legalizing child marriage is to prevent cases of "accidental or unlawful pregnancies" (Barr 6). Those who do engage in premarital sex or become pregnant before marriage are punished for bringing dishonor to their family. As a result, this is a way for parents to ensure that their daughters do not get punished by becoming wives as soon as possible.

Furthermore, because of the lack of access to education, girls of young ages are not aware of the human, constitutional, and legal rights they deserve. They lack awareness of the rights they are supposed to have, so they are raised with this mindset and pass it down to subsequent generations. They believe that their status in the family is below their husbands. These Bangladeshi communities do not consider school to be a necessity, or even important for girls, as it is believed that they will grow up to be wives. Because of this, women lose educational opportunities and gender inequality persists. Child marriage is a result of deep-rooted gender inequality, from which girls are disproportionately affected throughout Bangladesh, but can be exacerbated by poverty and limited access to education. Having easy access to free, informal education would provide them with more knowledge about their rights and give them the courage to speak out for themselves, and perhaps even influence others to advocate for change.

Girls can also suffer damaging physical and psychological effects as a result of early marriage and pregnancy. Many men take advantage of marriage by assaulting their wives because the girls are unable to voice their concerns openly, so incidences of partner violence and marital rape normally go unnoticed (Huda 2). Men's voices are more favored in these patriarchal societies, and sometimes rape is not thought of as rape since the wife and husband are immediately expected to consent to each other as long as they are married to each other. Bangladesh does have a law regarding rape; Section 375 of the Penal Code has an exception that states "sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under thirteen years of age, is not rape" (Huda 2). This law is quite horrifying because even though girls over 13 are considered to have reached puberty, they still are considered children, and not all girls immediately reach puberty once they are 13, yet sexual interactions with their husbands are still permitted. Girls who become brides before the age of 13 would possibly not be involved in sexual activity then, but they are still required to live with their husbands regardless. Once they turn thirteen, however, their husbands may engage in this sexual behavior on their behalf, but these girls would not be able to protest this because the law allows these actions. Even if underage girls are married, they may still be subjected to marital rape, but this is often done in silence. There are cases of sexual abuse and violence that occur secretly, but this law states that this does not apply to underage girls. Marriage does not automatically mean consent to sexual intercourse, especially in the case of a child.

When girls are forced to marry at a very early age, they suffer emotional trauma from being repeatedly raped and violated throughout their marriage. As married women are assumed to be in the possession of their husband, they are isolated and deprived of the company of their families and friends, which further deteriorates their mental state. A combination of these factors

can lead to further mental issues, including anxiety, depression, body dysmorphia, PTSD, and suicide (Naved 3). Girls not only suffer the psychological problems of marriage, but they also suffer from adverse health consequences. According to Kamal (2013), women who are married as children have greater chances of unwanted pregnancies, stillbirths or miscarriages, sexually transmitted diseases, and cervical cancer (1). Offspring are at increased risk for premature birth and death (Nour 20). Not only can future generations be negatively affected, but pregnancy mishaps can also be fatal to the young mother. Due to the ongoing epidemic of failed pregnancies and the death of young girls, it is alarming to realize that these issues are progressively becoming a normal occurrence in Bangladeshi communities. In the event that girls can escape from their husbands, they are left with physical and psychological trauma, since there is limited counseling and therapy for women in their communities. The Bangladeshi government lacks a strong healthcare system, so receiving counseling or therapy is highly unlikely, especially for girls (Joarder et al. 2). Despite this, the country does have several non-governmental agencies that assist in public health -- vaccinations, emergency relief, education for children (Vaughan et al. 6). If enough people advocate for services that can monitor the well-being of others, current agencies can play a vital role in providing counseling to any individual who needs it.

Furthermore, efforts have been made in the past to reduce the rates of children becoming brides. Bangladesh and other countries that suffer from this issue have implemented solutions provided by prominent international agencies and organizations. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) partnered with United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2016 and launched the Global Programme to End Child Marriage by 2030. UNICEF made it possible for thousands of girls from remote areas to attend school and receive the education needed to develop necessary life skills. Various forms of media like radio, television, and social media were used to spread

information in Bangladesh about this problem (“UNFPA-UNICEF Global”) Through this project, more awareness was being raised across the globe, and successful changes began to take place, as more girls were completing their education and learning the necessary skills to function in the real world.

Despite the challenges they faced themselves, Bangladeshi girls dared to finally speak up about gender inequality issues they encountered in their villages. Shortly after UNICEF launched its campaign, the South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC) organized a meeting to promote awareness and discuss approaches to the prevention of child trafficking and forced marriage (“South Asian Initiative”). The work of this organization indicated that this issue is slowly gaining more recognition on a regional level. Because South Asian countries were more affected by this approach, Bangladesh was placed further in the spotlight concerning child brides, so their government assumed more responsibility to help adolescent girls in these situations. At this point, child marriage rates were on the decline in 2016 because of UNICEF’s partnership and increased awareness of this issue from other organizations across the world. It appeared that positive change was truly happening as if these matters were finally progressing in the right direction. However, the next year, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017 caused a significant setback in the process of reducing the number of child marriages, which was then further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that happened in recent months (Siddiq 4). Because of stay-at-home orders throughout Bangladesh, many young girls have been forced to stay in unsafe households, increasing the risk of sexual violence and domestic abuse (Sifat 3). Financial problems have also worsened for families, causing them to send their daughters off to marriage. Several schools, educational services, and community support organizations that served the needs of girls in small communities were closed down.

These organizations could not have anticipated an incident like the pandemic before it happened, so, unfortunately, child marriage rates have returned to their former state. Despite this, services and schools are slowly beginning to resume, so these organizations must return to work quickly while taking the proper precautions.

Certain measures can be taken to advance the eradication of child marriage in Bangladesh. Free, high-quality informal education programs for girls of all ages would be a step to solve the problem of this nationwide practice. In addition to learning what would be taught in the traditional classroom, girls could participate in workshops or camps that would be designed to educate them about their human rights and how they should be treated in the society they live in. Educating a girl in one village can help teach another daughter in one village. International Center for Research on Women researchers discovered that across 15 sub-Saharan African countries, each year of school attendance by girls significantly reduced the chance of them being married before their eighteenth birthday (Wodon et al. 7). Increasing the awareness of free support networks and educational services, like launching social media campaigns, organizing educational events in small communities, or having journalists report information on popular news platforms (CNN, The New York Times, BBC News), will slowly reduce the number of girls trapped in forced marriages. Families will not have to worry about school fees for their children since girls will receive free schooling. Education will help girls set attainable life goals, and they will become aware of possible careers that they could pursue. They can learn to feel confident in themselves and their decisions, like taking action against gender discrimination. When younger girls see older women making a difference, this will inspire them to think the same way, so they will be motivated to go to school and become educated.

The quickest and most effective way to establish change would be to enact a new law that is passed by the Bangladesh parliament to increase the age limit for marriage up to at least 18 years of age. The child marriage rate could drop significantly if this law is instituted in this society with no exceptions, so there could be no possible loopholes for anyone. This change would be stronger because it would be a government initiative rather than one initiated by a community. Although this law could potentially be proposed and passed, it is unlikely that all Bangladeshis will agree with it and voice their support for it, as is the case with almost any law. Nevertheless, breaking the law would result in punishment, which would be a deterrent for the citizens of Bangladesh who choose not to comply with the law. In turn, this could encourage people to follow through with this law. There is no doubt that some individuals will find a way to violate the law, but overall, the prevalence of this phenomenon will be drastically reduced.

The principal solution lies in eliminating gender inequality, as it is the underlying cause of this practice. Although improvements from UNICEF and SAIEVAC have been made over the years, much work remains to be done. Education of men and boys, especially young boys starting school, would be valuable; this would help them avoid misogynist attitudes towards women or change their approach to issues like child marriage. School curriculums can emphasize gender equality and the importance of treating everyone as equal, despite one's differences. Having discussions with each other on what is right and wrong or reading texts from other parts of the world that raise awareness of women's inequality will allow boys to grow up with healthy mindsets from a young age. In a patriarchal country like Bangladesh, educating men will result in change. Because men hold power, educating them on women's rights and gender equality will bring about positive changes and make them feel empowered to help advocate for change with women.

A positive outcome could be achieved by providing educational opportunities to girls of all ages; at least one girl is being helped and educated, and this knowledge can be passed onto others. Despite this benefit, conservative fundamentalists might argue that these girls are too young or not mentally developed to understand complex topics regarding their rights and the injustices that exist in marginalized communities. Nevertheless, by exposing young girls to this information, they are prepared to live in the society they now live in and similar communities they may encounter in the future. It is never too young to educate others; the right information needs to be imparted at a young age, so that girls grow up with a positive mentality and pass it onto others.

As observed in the past, governments normally face opposition whenever they attempt to pass a new law that is controversial to the public. If the law regarding the 18-year-old marriage cut-off date were proposed, fundamentalists would protest and pressure the parliament to oppose the passage of the law. They will likely argue that raising the cut-off age to 18 will increase the number of premarital pregnancies, bringing dishonor and shame on families. However, one must consider the fact that the positives of this situation outweigh the negatives. In early marriage, girls will usually get pregnant at a young age, which is harmful to both the mother and her baby. The mother's well-being would be compromised. There would be less chance for the girl to receive an education and become a productive member of society. Girls will be hurt physically and psychologically due to forced marriage. Another counterargument to this proposal would be to address what steps could be taken to convince the government of Bangladesh to consider passing this law, given that such legislation will not be passed by the parliament immediately upon its introduction. Therefore, launching a grassroots movement involving educated parties could provoke some sort of response from the government. These same educated individuals

could be used to help fundamentalists understand that a child's well-being comes first and that forcing them to marry is not morally right. On the other hand, for this law to even be considered, significant positive changes must be made within the government to truly achieve visible improvements.

It is uncomfortable to learn of young girls being forced to marry men three or four times their age, but the numbers of these marriages continue to rise each day, and it is the reality that millions of girls face in Bangladesh. Early marriages hinder the development of these children, yet the patriarchy of this society stays oblivious to these devastating effects. This practice is also a serious human rights violation; girls are deprived of the opportunity to happily enjoy their childhood, obtain a good education, or even live the lives they dream of. Therefore, introducing education into every girl's life, passing a law that penalizes any individual responsible for early marriage under any circumstance, and educating men and boys about the importance of gender equality will help reduce the rate at which children are being forced into marriage each day. Yet, it is important to note that even if the Bangladeshi society were to consider these solutions, it will take time to implement them; they require long-term, sustainable efforts ("A Theory of Change"). If these measures are taken, adolescent girls can become vocal about the future they wish to pursue, using their newfound knowledge from school and their families' support, and eventually serve as role models for the next generation and create lasting, positive changes, leading to a safer community.

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