



“Solidarity for the Children of SAARC”

**CHILD MARRIAGE IN SOUTH ASIA:
REALITIES, RESPONSES AND THE WAY FORWARD**

TECHNICAL THEMATIC PAPER

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CHILD MARRIAGE IN SOUTH ASIA: REALITIES, RESPONSES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Introduction:

Child marriage is a serious human rights crisis and one of the most pressing development concerns in the world today. Defined as marriage under the age of 18 (UN 2000), child marriage disproportionately and negatively affects girls who are more likely to be married as children than boys (Mathur et al 2003; UNICEF 2005; Save the Children 2004). Currently over 60 million girls and women are affected by child marriage globally (ICRW 2011). Child marriage is particularly pervasive across South Asia and Africa, where 50-70 percent of girls in some countries are married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2009).

Child marriage, a form of early and forced alliance, is steeped in harmful traditional norms and practices passed across generations, which has a debilitating impact on the lives of girls, their families and society at large. It is a harmful practice that significantly undermines the best interests of the girl child. The occurrence of child marriage is greater in poorer families and those with lower levels of education, and is also high in fragile states hit by natural catastrophe and conflict (World Vision, 2013).

Apart from being a human rights violation child marriage has grave consequences for girls' reproductive and sexual health, impeding their overall development and wellbeing. Child marriage denies girls their childhood, as well as crucial education and employment opportunities. It makes them vulnerable to sexual and other forms of physical violence and abuse. Despite these adverse consequences, child marriages continue unabated. This is indeed a matter of grave concern and it requires serious deliberation and action. There are initiatives on child marriage prevention undertaken by state and development organizations in South Asia. However, high rates of child marriage in the region requires an in-depth review of the problem, and more meaningful efforts for its elimination including through appropriate law reform and legal accountability. Therefore child marriage should be part of South Asian countries' priority agenda for mobilizing adequate resources, energy and commitment toward ending the practice.

Objective

This technical note highlights the prevalence of child marriage in South Asia and its adverse social, health and developmental impacts on girls' lives. It reviews legislative and other responses in the form of government policies and frameworks as well as programs adopted by different South Asian countries to address child marriage. Additionally it offers a way forward for both policy makers and development practitioners in terms of policy and program recommendations to eliminate child marriage in South Asia.

Methodology

The findings and recommendations in this note are based on a literature review of secondary sources. These sources include: global evaluation studies of efforts to end the practice, empirical studies conducted by international development organizations and government reports/records to understand the legislative response to child marriage.

Child Marriage: Prevalence in South Asia

South Asia accounts for almost half of all child marriages that occur globally- the most of any region in the world. Child marriage, defined internationally as marriage where one or both spouses are under the age of 18, is legally prohibited under national laws as well as by international human rights treaties adopted by South Asian countries; however, the practice persists with impunity. In South Asia, 46% of women between ages 20-24 report being married before age 18 in 2010, this translated to 24.4 million women in the region. Estimates project that 130 million more girls in South Asia will be married as children between 2010 to 2030 (UNFPA, 2012)

The prevalence of child marriage varies substantially between and within countries in South Asia. Bangladesh (DHS, 2011) has the highest prevalence of child marriage in the region (66 per cent) followed by Afghanistan (46 percent, CSO & UNICEF, 2012), India (46 percent, NFHS-2005-06) and Nepal (41 percent, DHS, 2011). These four countries are considered the region's 'hot spots' due to their high child marriage prevalence. Girls living in rural areas are hardest hit by child marriage, and the problem is worst in rural Bangladesh with 70 percent of girls married early, followed by India with 56 percent. (ICRW, 2012)

In some countries, the prevalence of child marriage among the youngest adolescents has decreased. A recent quantitative analysis (Raj, 2012) of changes in the age of marriage in Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Pakistan reveals that over the past two decades (1991- 2007) significant relative reductions have occurred in the marriage of girls under the age of 14 across all four nations. However there has been no change in the marriage of girls aged 16-17 for any nation except Bangladesh – where marriages in this age group actually increased by nearly 35 percent. This requires further research and exploration. In comparison to the four “hot spots” Pakistan has a moderate level of child marriage. Approximately 30 percent of girls in the country are married as child brides. Similar to other countries, the prevalence of child marriage in Pakistan is higher among rural girls (37 per cent) than urban ones (21 percent).

Child marriage disproportionately affects young girls, who are much more likely to be married as children than young boys (Mathur, Greene & Malhotra 2003). Girls are significantly more likely than boys to be married as children – 30 per cent of girls aged 15-19 years are currently married or in union in South Asia, compared to just 5 per cent of boys in the same age bracket (UNICEF, 2011). In majority of the countries across in Africa and Asia the legal age at marriage differs between girl and boy. Across globe 54% of the countries have minimum legal age similar for both boys and girls while it is different in another 46% countries.¹

¹ Right To Education Project. 'National law and policies on minimum ages' <http://www.right-to-education.org/node/58>

Table 1: Minimum legal Age at Marriage for boys and girls in South Asia

Country	Male	Female	Link
Afghanistan	18	16	http://www.wclrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Early-Marrige-with-cover.pdf
Bangladesh	21	18	http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/CRC/docs/study/responses/Bangladesh.pdf
Bhutan	18	18	http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=GenderStat&f=inID:19
India	21	18	http://wcd.nic.in/cmr1929.htm
Maldives	18	18	http://www.right-to-education.org/country-node/459/country-minimum
Nepal	21	18	http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/CRC/docs/study/responses/Nepal.pdf
Pakistan	18	16	http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/national-marriage-registration-to-enforce-child-marriage-laws-in-pakistan/
Sri Lanka	18	18	http://www.right-to-education.org/country-node/395/country-minimum

The Maldives has the lowest rate of child marriage in the region with just about 4 percent followed by Sri-lanka (12 percent) and Bhutan (14 percent). However, according to the U.S. Department of State's 2010 Human Rights Report, many Maldivians travel to Pakistan or India to carry out illegal child marriages. Whereas in Bhutan child marriage has become less common in urban areas, girls as young as 15 in remote villages are still reportedly married in secret ceremonies. The incidence is highest in the western and central areas of the country, affecting between 24 and 28 percent of girls aged 15 to 18.

Except for Afghanistan and Pakistan the legal age at marriage for girls in the other six countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bhutan) is 18. Afghanistan and Pakistan follow Sharia law which allows girls to legally marry at the age of 15 and 16, respectively.

Why does child marriage persist?

Despite most countries enacting laws that stipulate 18 as the minimum legal age for marriage for girls, child marriage is widely prevalent in South Asia. Most of the marriages are arranged by parents and local leaders with or without the consent of the girl. A variety of factors perpetuate child marriage, including a high value placed on girls' sexuality, gender discrimination, gaps in national laws, poor enforcement of child marriage prevention laws, illiteracy, poor access to education poverty and instability due to conflict and natural disasters. These structural drivers of child marriage are discussed below.

Protection of Girls' Sexuality

Early marriage is seen as a preventative measure to protect girl's chastity and sexuality upon which rests the family's honour and respect. ICRW found in a recent study that parents in India are often worried about the safety and security of young girls. Their worry stems from both fear of sexual assault and girls choosing to begin sexual activity (ICRW, 2013.) These findings echo similar ones from a study in South Asia by Raj et al (2010). They noted that early marriage protects girls' marriageability which can be destroyed by premarital sex through sexual violence or through choice.

Gender Discrimination

Gender inequality is a leading cause of child marriage across South Asia. Families and communities see girls as having little importance outside of their roles as wives and mothers. They place little value on the girl child, viewing her as a financial burden who brings no income to the family at the time of her marriage. In fact, delaying her marriage means additional expenditure for the family and a larger dowry to be paid. Thus many parents, particularly those living in poverty, see little merit in investing in their daughter's education and delaying her marriage once she reaches puberty,

Limited Educational Opportunities

There is a clear association between education and delaying marriage. Across nations it is the poor and least educated girls who are most vulnerable to early marriage (Raj et al, 2010, 2012). On average, women with more years of education marry at a later age. In Sri Lanka, the education of young women has been a crucial factor in increasing the age of marriage there (ICRW, 2012). Evidence shows that the more education a girl receives, the less likely she is to marry as a child. For instance girls in Nepal who completed grade 10 are five times more likely to marry at age 18 or older than those who have not received any education at all (Nepal Demographic Health Survey, 2011).

Low educational levels among parents and poor access to schools, particularly in rural areas, impede girls' education and increase their likelihood of early marriage. A 2010 study of 200 child marriages in Afghanistan found that 71 percent of parents who forced their underage daughters to marry were illiterate (ICRW, 2012). Lack of educational facilities or any alternative for girls in rural areas force parents to marry off their daughter early. A recent study by ICRW in India identifies inadequate school infrastructure, lack of safe school spaces and long distances to schools as hindrances to rural girls' access to education. In rural India secondary schools are mostly located far away and parents are worried about sending their daughter to these schools, especially in the absence of adequate and regular

transportation and high rates of public violence. In the absence of such educational opportunities compounded by a lack of employment options many parents arrange marriages for their daughter after she completes her primary education (ICRW, 2013).

Poverty

Poverty is one of the main determinants of early marriage. Various studies reveal that marriage of minor aged girls is more likely to occur in rural and impoverished areas (Raj et al 2012). Girls from poorer families are more vulnerable to child marriage because the costs associated with education impede their attendance. Moreover poor girls are more likely to experience sexual harassment from men and boys from wealthier families, thus parents see marriage as safeguarding their daughter's chastity. Across rural Bangladesh and India many parents consider girls as an economic burden to families, and therefore they are married off as soon as they reach puberty. Similarly in Nepal parents are encouraged to marry off their daughters as early as possible since older and better-educated boys can demand a higher dowry (ICRW, 2013). Interestingly in Afghanistan parents are quick to marry off their daughters to receive a bride price.

Weak Enforcement of Child Marriage laws:

Despite the prevalence of child marriage law, the practice continues to flourish in the South Asia. Poor implementation of child marriage legislation is one of the main reasons for its high prevalence in South Asia. This was coupled with the married child (below the age of 18) who is considered legally as adults and is deprived of the rights to child protection and thereby opens avenues for abuse and exploitation with impunity. Most national governments have enacted legislations in alignment with the international instruments and framed clear laws to prevent child marriage however enforcement remains the biggest challenge. Limited implementation machinery, poor coordination and convergence amongst various stakeholders, and limited awareness of the act are some of the reasons for the weak enforcement of the law.

Instability

In addition to other causes, instability caused by natural disasters and regional or national conflict exacerbate the likelihood of early marriage for girls. For instance decades of war and the devastating 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka pushed desperate families to marry off their young daughters to relieve economic strife. Girls were forced into early marriage with tsunami widowers, primarily to receive state subsidies and benefits for marrying and starting a family. (ICRW, 2012)

The recent report published by the World Vision (2013) also reveals that adolescent girls are extremely vulnerable to early marriage in fragile states hit by natural calamity such as drought, floods etc. In Bangladesh, out of all the married children under 18, nearly 2/3 of them were married (62 percent) in the 12 months following cyclone Sidr in 2007. Insecurity of camp life, abandonment of girl's education due to closure of schools meant that adolescent girls were forced to marry without their consent. Study participants in Bangladesh reported fear of sexual violence, rape, unwanted pregnancy outside marriage, family honor and shame, hunger were reported as reasons for early marriage. Early marriage is viewed as a protective and safety measure by families and communities to safeguard family 'honor' as well as preserve fertility of girls within the marriage.

Legislative Response to Child Marriage in South Asia: Policy Overview

National governments and the international community are increasingly recognizing child marriage as a serious challenge, both as a violation of children's human rights and as a barrier to key development outcomes. The International conventions, including the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW- Article 16) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides for the prohibition of child marriage. Most of the countries in South Asia have committed to protecting and ensuring child rights and are also accountable under international treaty obligations to combat early marriage.

Most national governments in the region are aware of the seriousness of the issue, and have taken some steps to prevent child marriage from occurring. For example, all countries have adopted laws designed to regulate its proliferation and prevalence. Laws in India, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan reflect international standards, with legal age limits for girls set at 18. On the other hand, in Afghanistan and Pakistan where Sharia law bears a greater influence, girls can legally marry at age 15 and 16, respectively. And in Sri Lanka, a mixed legal system prevails, with non-Muslim girls allowed to legally marry at 18, while Muslim girls are allowed by law to wed at 15.

Also it is important to recognize that laws and policies in isolation might increase the risk and vulnerability of children. Important to highlight is a decision of Supreme Court of Indonesia on the subject of early marriage and the worst forms of child labor. When a 17 years old girl was found working as waitress in a brothel house, the defendant was convicted by the District Court but later released free as they found the girl is married. Like many other countries in Indonesia customary law, a child is considered an adult when the child either reaches a certain age or is married.²In the light of the existing legal framework as well as the current example of violation of customary law in Indonesia this section of the paper presents the legal and policy frameworks adopted by different South Asian countries to address child marriage:

Afghanistan:

The civil law in Afghanistan mandates legal age of marriage for girls as 16 and for boys 18. Sharia Law that operates in the country goes by the age of puberty and therefore in practice, a girl is often married off when she is considered 'physically mature', which can occur at a much younger age.

A girl cannot legally marry until she is 16. However, according to Sharia Law, her father can allow her to marry at age 15. The government of Afghanistan has issued orders to take to control forced and early marriage in the country. In response to this, the Ministry of Labour and Social affairs and Disabled has developed a national strategy for children at risk in order to raise awareness on rights violation and negative health consequences for young girls due to forced and early marriage.

Bangladesh:

The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 passed during British rule is still applied in Bangladesh. The law stipulates 18 as the legal age of marriage for girls. Enforcement of the law however is appalling as

² Available from <http://putusan.mahkamahagung.go.id/putusan/ecccd689cdd6e6de22ea66e0d9ace9f8> (accessed 19 June 2013) [hereinafter Case Decision]

reflected by the extremely high rate of child marriage in the country. A national law passed in 2004 requires that all births be registered in order to determine a girl's age when she marries. This has resulted in high rates of birth registration in Bangladesh with registered births increasing from just 9.8 percent to 53.6 percent between 2006 and 2009. To combat child marriage efforts have been made at the grassroots level. For instance Gram Sarkars (village government bodies) have taken on the responsibility of combating child marriage. However stronger enforcement of national child marriage and protection laws is clearly needed.

India:

India has taken positive and progressive legal steps to prevent child marriages. India's first law setting minimum age limits for marriage was the Child Marriage Restraint Act, enacted in 1929. A new law banning child marriage was passed in December, 2006, which prohibits marriages in which either party is a minor and sets the legal age for marriage at 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys. The new law mandates punitive measures against all who perform, permit or promote child marriage. These measures include imprisonment of up to two years or a fine of up to INR 100,000 (US\$1,800). The law provides for the intervention of courts to prevent child marriages through stay orders. Another positive feature of the law is the nullification of a child marriage with the provision for providing maintenance and residence from husband/in-laws to the separated female until she is remarried. In addition, a 2006 Supreme Court decision requires registration of all marriages, which creates a more favorable environment for the law's implementation and enforcement. Despite these laudable changes enforcement and monitoring is the biggest challenge in India. In addition to this the co-existence of personal laws and customary practices that permit child marriage is followed by many people and it is major barrier to the elimination of child marriage in India

Nepal:

The Nepalese Child Marriage law stipulates that both girls and boys can marry at age 18 with parental consent, and at age 20 without consent. In addition, it recognizes daughters as rightful heirs, and increases the punishment for child marriage to imprisonment for up to three years and a fine of up to ten thousand rupees, and with an increase in the age of the girl, the punishment decreases. The other legislation includes the Marriage Registration Act, 1971, and the Birth (Registration) Act 1977. While these are positive steps against child marriage, high numbers of girls continue to be married before the age of 18.

Pakistan:

The law in Pakistan stipulates that the legal age for marriage is 16 for girls and 18 for boys, in accordance with the colonial-era Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. Punitive measures for the violation (for a man 18 or older) include a fine of up to 1,000 rupees or a maximum prison sentence of one month, or both. However, unlike India, nullifying illegal child marriages is not mandatory under the current law. Tribal customary law namely vani and swara, which mandates the forced marriage of girls as compensation or currency to settle a dispute or debt, persists, although a recently proposed amendment would authorize stringent punishment for perpetrators of vani and swara. Birth registration is very low in the country (27 percent) and is a major contributing factor to poor enforcement of the 1929 law. Marriage registration is also extremely low despite the 1962 Muslim Family Law which mandates it. This poses serious challenges to preventing child marriage in the country.

Sri Lanka:

In 1995, the minimum age of marriage for both boys and girls was set at 18 years for the non-Muslim majority of the population. Progressive legal reforms and judgments pronounced by courts in Sri Lanka have played an important role in reducing child marriage prevalence. For instance all marriages and the mutual consent of both parties to those marriages must be registered, essentially invalidating non-consensual marriages forced on girls by parents. This has helped educate the public about the injustice and illegality of child marriage. There is, however, a mixed legal system that exists in the country for Sri Lanka's minority Muslim community. The Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act of 1951 continues to regulate matrimonial law for the community and allows girls to marry as young as 12 years old or even younger with the permission of a "Quazi," a Muslim court.

Maldives:

The legal system in the Maldives is based on a mixture of Islamic law and English common law. According to civil law the legal age of marriage is now 18 for girls in the Maldives. However, the minimum age for marriage that is commonly observed in practice is 15. This is because Sharia law is more dominant in defining marriage practices than the modern Maldivian judicial system. Moreover over the past 10 years there has been no record of children under 15 being married in the Maldives. The government has established Children's Courts and Units for the Rights of the Children (URC) to work towards eliminating child marriage and violence against children.

Bhutan:

Child marriage law in Bhutan, in compliance with international standards, stipulates the minimum legal age of marriage is 18 years for both boys and girls. Violation of the law results in a fine ranging from Ngultrums 300 – 1,000 (about US\$5-18), and the return of property received in marriage. Also as per the law, no marriage certificate are issued for marriages under 18, however it is still happening according to the anecdotal evidence in the hospitals. Also, the government has made birth registration compulsory within one month of the birth. In 2007, women and child protection unit was established with Royal Police to work towards reducing child marriage. While the law's existence is an important first step, enforcement remains weak in remote, rural areas.

Negative Consequences

Child marriage is not only a human rights violation but has numerous and serious educational, health and developmental consequences for girls. It robs them of their childhood and sentences them to a life of poverty and economic dependence, with little or no education. Child marriage negatively impacts married adolescents as they are highly vulnerable to poor maternal health outcomes, a higher risk of HIV infection and are more likely to suffer from domestic and sexual abuse. These negative consequences are discussed below within the context of South Asia:

Child Marriage Impedes Girl's Education.

The low value of girls is closely linked to minimal investments made in their future. Girls are withdrawn from school once their marriage is fixed and they are less likely than boys to be educated. Research in Pakistan shows a direct correlation between education and age at marriage. Many studies have also highlighted that adolescent married girls' access to formal and informal education is severely limited because of domestic and child rearing responsibilities, and unequal gender norms that do not value education for girls (ICRW, 2005, IFFP: 2006). Also, poverty stricken families often prefer investing their limited resources on boys rather than girls due to the belief that investment in a girl's education will not generate monetary benefits for the families.

Early Pregnancy can Result in Poor Maternal and Infant Health Outcomes.

Girls face enormous pressure to prove their fertility soon after marrying, and have little access to information on reproductive health and ability to influence family planning decision making. Once pregnant, adolescent girls are physically, mentally and emotionally unprepared for childbirth. According to UNICEF (2009) adolescent mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die of pregnancy and childbirth complications as women between the ages of 20 and 24. The situation is even graver for girls under age 15, who are five times more likely to die from maternal causes. And young pregnant girls are likely to deliver a low birth weight and premature infant who is more likely to die. If they live, these children are at increased risk of malnutrition. (Raj et al, 2012)

In Afghanistan, early marriage and pregnancy contribute to the country having the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world, with 24,000 deaths each year, many of them under the age of 18 (2010 report Afghanistan, ICRW, 2013). Data from India's National Family Health Surveys 2005–06 reveal that those married as minors (in comparison to adult mothers) are less likely to use contraceptives before a first child birth, and more likely to have high fertility, repeat childbirth in less than 24 months, have multiple unwanted pregnancies and undergo pregnancy termination - all factors associated with maternal and child health risks (Raj et al, 2009).

Child Brides are at Increased Risk of Sexually-Transmitted Infections, including HIV.

Across South Asia, child brides often marry much older men who have a higher chance of being HIV positive than younger men, due to a greater likelihood of having had unprotected sex with multiple or high risk partners (ICRW, 2012). In addition, girls have less control in negotiating condom use or refusing

sex with their partners than their adult female counterparts, and also have little access to health information, protection, and services. All of these factors make them more vulnerable to contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Child brides are Vulnerable to Abuse and Poor Mental Health.

Violence is a major consequence of child marriage in South Asia where married adolescents are highly vulnerable to abuse including physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence (Levine et.al, 2009; UNICEF, 2005, ICRW, 2007; IPPF, 2006, World Vision, 2013). A study in India found that young women who married before age 18 were twice as likely to report being beaten, slapped or threatened by their husbands than girls who married later. Also they were three times as likely to report being forced to have sex without their consent in the previous six months (ICRW, 2007). Recent research in Bangladesh reveal that girls regularly face domestic violence if they fail to meet household and sexual demands and expectations from husband and family members This includes conflicts over dowry, which are a frequent cause of heinous instances of violence directed at girls including mental torture and physical abuse. The pressure of early marriage is even felt by young men in Bangladesh, as they attributed their aggressive behavior towards their wives to their unpreparedness for marriage and family life (World Vision, 2013).

Girls married as minors are at increased risk for poor mental health outcomes, including depression and suicide. Many child brides in Bangladesh reported forced social isolation and limited access to support networks such as family, friends and community. In the absence of safety networks girls are often left alone to cope with the physical and emotional challenges of marriage. (World Vision, 2013) Research in Afghanistan reveals that 2,400 women commit self-immolation each year, and child and forced marriages, along with sexual and domestic violence, are key causes (2010 Government report).

Recommendations and Conclusion

Early marriage of girls is socially valued and is a widespread practice in South Asia. Despite the existence of national and international treaties and laws, child marriage continues to be pervasive in the region, particularly in the four hotspot countries of Bangladesh, Afghanistan, India and Nepal. Clearly, there is a need for effective policies and programs to eliminate child marriage. Key priorities recommended for national and state governments are as follows:

Strengthen the legal framework and law enforcement:

Although all the South Asian countries have adopted laws to prevent child marriage, the absence of a uniform law establishing a minimum legal age of marriage of at least 18 for girls, lack of awareness and enforcement remain the biggest challenges as child marriage practices continue unabated.

What should be done:

- Address gaps and inconsistencies in existing laws and, in accordance with international laws, establish a uniform minimum legal age at marriage of at least 18 for girls.
- **Ensure stringent punishment for violators of the law:** Identify and prosecute all parties involved in child marriage so that the law becomes a deterrent. Also, increase penalties in countries where they are currently low.
- **Raise awareness on law:** Create awareness among public and duty bearers i.e. government and law enforcement officials on girls' legal rights to be free from child marriage and protected from violations of their reproductive rights and sexual violence resulting from the practice. In addition create/raise awareness among girls on possible legal options for avoiding or leaving a child marriage.
- **Conduct comprehensive training programs:** Inform law enforcement officials, registrars, judiciary officials and religious leaders about the negative impacts of child marriage especially in high-risk and poverty-stricken areas where child marriage is rampant and their role in its prevention.
- **Increase public awareness:** Mount public campaigns to increase awareness of the laws and punishments associated with the practice.
- **Strengthen vital registration systems:** Improve the birth and marriage registration systems to better prove a girl's age at marriage. It is important to make people understand the value of birth registration which ensures rights to entitlement for the child in the long run. At the same time birth registration ensures better implementation of the laws including child marriage prevention laws besides providing legal rights to the child.
- **Develop and strengthen effective child protection mechanisms,** including community based child protection systems.

Increase Educational Opportunities for Girls

Providing education especially at the secondary level to girls is a key strategy for eliminating child marriage. Girls who marry early often abandon formal education. To keep girls in school, parents and girls need greater assurances about the quality, safety and value of continued education. Families also need financial incentives to make education affordable, particularly for secondary and tertiary education in which enrolment lags far behind that of primary education in the region. While achievements have been made in primary education girls' enrolment across many South Asian countries in secondary and tertiary enrolments lags behind.

Research from Bangladesh illustrates that providing scholarships for secondary school greatly influences parents' decisions to keep their daughters in school. Evaluation findings indicate that when such scholarships were provided to girls ages 11 to 15 from 1994 to 2001, they had a positive influence on girls' enrollment, attendance, and retention rates (World Bank, 2008). Similarly, a child protection and welfare scheme introduced by the government of Nepal which includes a scholarship program is encouraging girls to continue on to secondary school and complete their studies.

What should be done:

- **Increase investments in girls education:** Allocate **sufficient** resources from national and state budgets **to** ensure quality education at all levels for girls.
- **Provide incentives to girls from economically impoverished families:** Offer conditional cash transfers or scholarships for secondary education to financially disadvantaged girls to continue their education.
- **Make schools safe and accessible:** Make schools more attractive to girls and their parents by making schools and surrounding safe, providing secure and clean toilets, having more women teachers and improving overall school quality.
- **Promote education for married adolescent:** Promote the re-enrolment of girls who have dropped out of school so that they can continue and complete at least their secondary education.

Provide Life Skills Training and Reproductive Health Education and Services:

Early marriage and adolescent child bearing pose serious consequences to girls' health and development. Life skills education that engages girls, their families and communities can play a role in delaying marriage. Sexual and reproductive health information and services also are important for adolescent girls, especially in supporting those who are already married.

What should be done:

- **Include a focus on life skills, sexual and reproductive health and rights in school curricula.** Train teachers or special staff to undertake discussions with students about relationships, gender discrimination, contraception and maternal and neo-natal health.

- **Promote adolescent girls' access to sexual and reproductive health information and services through government as well as NGO initiatives.**
- **Improve health systems:** Train health providers to provide information regarding sexual and reproductive health issues to adolescent girls. Gender-sensitive health policies, standards, and protocols should also be put in place.

Invest in Programs that Economically Empower Young Women and Girls

Programs that build girls' financial literacy and income generating skills can have a positive impact on preventing early marriage in South Asia. In Nepal a program providing livelihood and income-generating skills to girls has been found to be effective in preventing child marriage.

What should be done:

- **Support market-oriented interventions that economically empower girls and women;** Such interventions should be at both the national and local levels, and should prioritize girls and women in marginalized communities with a high prevalence of child marriage.

Enhance Safety in Public Areas

Young women and girls live in danger of sexual harassment and violence in many public places. The risk of sexual harassment and rape forces parents to marry off their daughters at an early age, before they lose their virginity (ICRW, 2013)

What should be done:

- Make public areas safer for women and girls.
- Provide safe transport facilities for girls to reach school safely.
- Create safe areas for women and girls especially during humanitarian emergencies.
- Establish user friendly helplines for girls and women to report and seek help in instances of abuse and violence.
- Sensitize law enforcers and the public about the importance of safety for women and girls.

Engage with Men and Boys in Preventing Child Marriage

Working with boys and men can be a promising strategy in child marriage prevention. A study in India found that boys could be successfully trained as educators and advocates for delaying marriage among girls (Gupta et al, 2008, ICRW).

Young boys and girls who articulate their views on marriage and education with clarity and maturity are often able to persuade their parents to prevent child marriage. Therefore it is important to provide young boys and girls with knowledge and information about health, education and their rights regarding child marriage, and also build their capacities and equip them with confidence so that they become ambassadors of child rights in their community.

World Vision is working with men and boys in India to challenge the beliefs and behaviors of fathers, sons, husbands and brothers as they have the capacity to influence harmful practices in their communities.

What should be done:

- **Work with men and boys in the community:** Engage men to challenge traditional gender norms and roles and address gender inequity.
- **Better understand the perspectives of married young men on child marriage.** To engage men and boys as advocates against child marriage, it is important to understand the experiences and attitudes of young men who marry early to underage girls.
- **Strengthen capacities and empower boys and girls in the community:** Platforms should be created at the community level to educate young boys and girls regarding negative consequences of child marriage and discuss issues and concerns regarding sexuality.

Address the Needs of Married Girls:

There are limited public and civil society programs that exist to meet the needs of married adolescents. In order to protect married adolescent girls from health and social vulnerabilities, it is imperative to provide measures specifically designed and targeted towards them.

What should be done:

- **Amend laws which prevent married and or pregnant girls from attending school.** Increased support for girls to go back to schools after marriage or child bearing.
- **Make programs and services available to married girls.** These include sexual and reproductive health, life skills and livelihoods interventions.
- **Mount community awareness and education campaigns to stress the value of completing secondary education for married girls.**

Increase the Value of the Girl Child:

Girls are traditionally undervalued and discriminated against in South Asia. The low social value placed on daughters is due to structural gender inequities that result in lack of access to educational and employment opportunities for girls in comparison with boys. In order to enhance the value of girls and women in society it is crucial to address the root cause of such inequalities by pressing for equal opportunities for girls. .

What should be done:

- **Provide equal opportunities for girls** in education, employment, and access to safe public spaces.

- **Showcase positive girl role models.** Support public campaigns, and engage with parents, local leaders, and government officials to discuss and promote positive girl role models from the community and society.

CONCLUSION

Of the various measures outlined above, no single measure alone will be sufficient to achieve significant reductions in child marriages. The answer lies in a comprehensive approach with a clear emphasis on enhancing the value of the girl child. Programs already under way must find ways to connect with each other or enhance their strategies. For example, an existing program to promote education among girls should be expanded to include community based campaigns and engagement with key stakeholders including parents and families to explicitly discuss and discourage child marriages and find ways to monitor the marriage process in a culturally sensitive manner. At the same time, the program should pay special attention to enhancing girls' safety and security while traveling to and attending school to ensure their protection from sexual and other forms of violence.

Efforts must be made to advocate with countries whose legal systems in preventing child marriages are not aligned with the international standards. For example it will be useful to engage with and advocate with the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan on the issue.

Child centric programs must focus on children's role in delaying the age of their marriage and build the capacities to effectively negotiate with their parents. Programs should work with children's groups to increase their participation and increase self-esteem and aspirations of girls in life in order to enhance their expectations and alternatives to early marriages. A support system around child centric programs will go a long way to sustain these changing aspirations.

In conclusion operational linkages must be found and implemented between education, livelihood and sexual and reproductive health and rights interventions. These linkages must operate within a favorable legislative framework and with the active engagement of community members and families to effectively address the issue of child marriages. Efforts also must be made to create gender equitable norms and practices that value girls' education, employability, earning potential and positive sexual and reproductive health outcomes.

The proposed recommendations will receive focus and support across board as child marriage is increasingly accepted as the violation of human rights of a (girl) child. For the first time, the Agreed Conclusions for the main theme "Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls" of the 57th Session of Commission on Status of Women, 2013, calls upon the state to **Enact, Review and Strictly enforce** laws and regulation concerning minimum legal age of consent and minimum age for marriage and further generate social support to end the practice of child, forced and early marriages. In the context of Post 2015 Development agenda, most of the leading child and women rights organizations are supporting UN Women call for specific commitments for gender equality, women rights and women empowerment and espousing for addressing structural barriers to gender equality and ensuring the rights of girls and women through transformative change. One of three target areas under integrated approach proposed is **Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence**. It identifies Harmful Traditional Practices as the causes and consequences of gender based inequalities as the ramification of the various forms of violence against girls and women is profound for individual, society and economy. Therefore, one of the proposed indicators is to monitor the percentage of women (20-24 years) reported being married before 18 years.

It is therefore, the obligation of the dutybearers to identify and strengthen the integrated pathways that acknowledges the value of girl children, build their social assets and eliminates barriers like child marriage on their progress towards empowerment.

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