

## Position Paper

# **The State of Child Marriage Prevention in Hard-to-Reach Char and Haor Regions in Bangladesh**



## Background:

Goal Five of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030 through the elimination of all harmful practices, including all child, early, and forced marriages<sup>1</sup>. In Bangladesh, despite continued efforts from the government and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the country maintains the fourth-highest child marriage rate in the world<sup>2</sup>. Child marriage is defined as the formal marriage or informal union of any person under the age of 18. These unions contribute to unequal power dynamics and gender inequality. The 2019 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) population report revealed that 59% of girls (under 18 years of age) in Bangladesh are victims of child marriage; this statistic remains the highest among South Asian countries<sup>3</sup>. According to the International Human Rights Convention (UDHR and CRC), child marriage is a violation of human rights and the rights of the child. Child marriage places the child spouse – particularly girls – at risk of domestic violence, forced and early pregnancy, sexual abuse and rape, and denial of access to education and other critical services. In Bangladesh, social norms remain a challenge to women's empowerment and act as a critical barrier to the prevention of child marriage. These strong social gender norms that pervade everyday life (i.e., a woman must “know her place” and a man cannot cry) only worsens the situation of child marriage in the country<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, while the current COVID-19 outbreak has called for the closure of educational institutions throughout the country, the rate of child marriage has been rising<sup>5</sup>. A survey conducted across 53 districts in Bangladesh by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) found that there were 462 child marriages in June 2020 – a sharp increase from the 180 child marriages reported in May 2020<sup>6</sup>. The causes that were identified for this alarmingly quick spike in the number of child marriages during the pandemic include the prolonged closure of schools, loss of income in families, and the overall economic condition of the country. It is important to note that the cost of arranging marriage events became much lower for families during the pandemic. Moreover, since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, regulatory authorities and government officials were called to focus their attention and efforts on pandemic response efforts, which created an oversight in child marriage prevention activities, thus incidents mostly occurred hidden from officials.

According to the data from BRAC's Community Empowerment Program (CEP), BRAC prevented 670 child marriages in 2019 and 1,091 in 2020 through persuasion and education efforts. At the same time, there were 167 attempts at child marriage in 2019 and 292 in 2020. An assessment report in March 2022 by MJF found that, between April and October of 2020, at least 13,886 girls in 21 districts were victims of child marriage. Of these girls, 48% were between 13 and 15 years old.

## Key Drivers of Child Marriage

**Key drivers of child marriage** have been identified at the global level and includes: gender inequality and restrictive gender norms; poverty and social exclusion; inconsistent or poorly implemented legislation; conflict and other ‘shocks’; and adolescents choosing to marry<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>, cited on 6 October 2020.

<sup>2</sup> [http://bmet.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bmet.portal.gov.bd/publications/d0a417cc\\_46ea\\_439f\\_aebf\\_e70dd03325e7/Brief%20on%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Bangladesh.pdf](http://bmet.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bmet.portal.gov.bd/publications/d0a417cc_46ea_439f_aebf_e70dd03325e7/Brief%20on%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Bangladesh.pdf), cited on 2 July 2020.

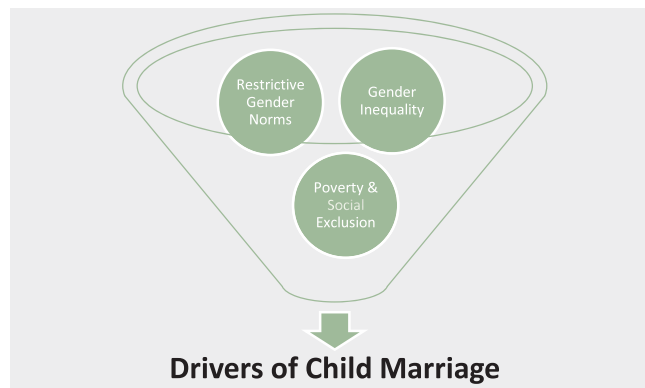
<sup>3</sup> [https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/SVVP19%20English-report-Web\\_0.pdf](https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/SVVP19%20English-report-Web_0.pdf), cited on 2 July 2020.

<sup>4</sup> [What Are the Relevant Social and Gender Norms? – Service Communication \(sbccimplementationkits.org\)](http://www.sbccimplementationkits.org/)

<sup>5</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/06/26/pandemic-puts-more-bangladeshi-girls-at-risk-of-child-marriage>, cited on 4 July 2020

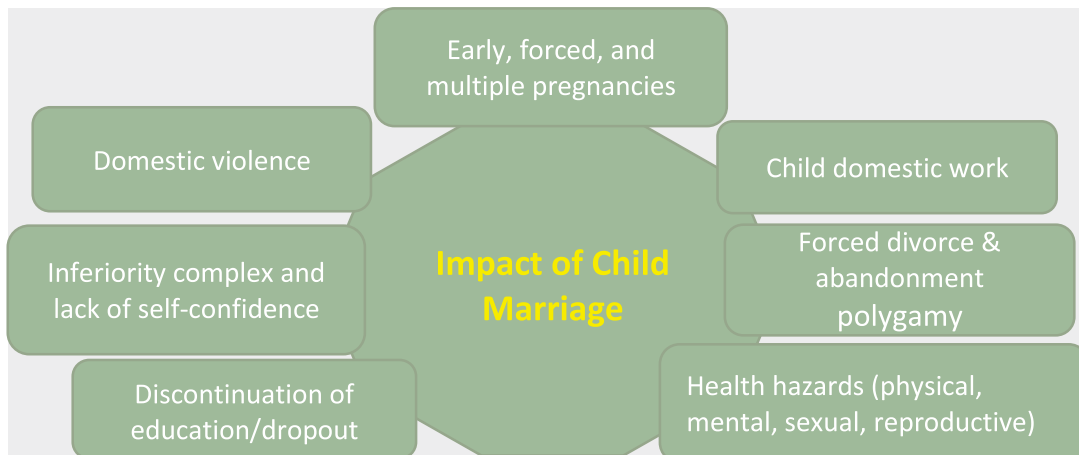
<sup>6</sup> [http://www.manusherjonno.org/latest\\_stories/sharp-rise-in-child-marriages-in-june-mjf-survey-reveals/](http://www.manusherjonno.org/latest_stories/sharp-rise-in-child-marriages-in-june-mjf-survey-reveals/), 8 October 2020.

<sup>7</sup> [What Are the Drivers of Child Marriage? A Conceptual Framework to Guide Policies and Programs - ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0926641020300000)



## Impact of Child Marriage

In terms of impact, the following are identified as **common outcomes of child marriage**: school dropout; early motherhood; vulnerability to complications during pregnancy and in childbirth, higher risks of unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and other sexual and reproductive health issues; greater vulnerability to gender-based violence; entrenchment of poverty and gender inequality; and poor emotional and psychological wellbeing.



## Child Marriage Restraint Act:

In February 2017, the Bangladesh government passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act to tackle the issue of child marriage. The following year in 2018, the government launched the National Plan of Action (NPA) to End Child Marriage to translate these political commitments into effective interventions<sup>8</sup>. The act was welcomed for its increased focus on stronger law enforcement and stringent punishment of offenders. However, civil society opposed the 'special provision' within the act that allows for girls under the age of 18 to be married under 'special circumstances'. Under the cover of this 'special provision', child marriage for reasons of pre-marital pregnancy caused by rape has been validated<sup>9</sup>. Child marriage is a highly complex issue, influenced by and impacting the particular social, economic, and cultural conditions in a country.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/plan-action-launched-eliminate-child-marriage-bangladesh>, cited on 6 October 2020.

<sup>9</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/03/24/first-child-marriage-under-special-provision-of-new-law-held-in-bangladesh>

This law was therefore enacted to comprehensively deal with the issues of underage marriage, and contained favorable provisions including:

- Reiterating the non-bailable and non-compoundable nature of the offense
- Setting up Child Marriage Prevention Committees
- Strengthening the powers of government officials
- Increasing penalties for underage marriages

## Purpose of the Position Paper:

In November 2020, CARE conducted a study<sup>10</sup> named “**Grassroots Approaches to Prevent Child Marriage in Northern Bangladesh**” in hard-to-reach Char and Haor regions in Bangladesh to understand the state of child marriage and the existing grassroots-level mechanisms used to tackle this issue. The study included 31 representatives from NGOs and the media. The study resulted in a set of recommendations on the prevention of child marriage through the use of innovative (consultation among mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, couple dialogues, social media campaign: It Ends With Me) as well as institutional mechanisms (accountability and enforcement). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on mass gatherings in 2020 and 2021, the SHOUHARDO III program held eight webinars at the district level and two at the regional level. On 10 December 2020, the study findings and recommendations were shared during a national webinar titled “Grassroots Approaches to Prevent Child Marriage”. The Honorable State Minister of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Government of Bangladesh (GoB), Ms. Fazilatun Nessa Indira MP, attended the event as the Chief Guest. Senior government officials from the Department of Women Affairs (DWA) and other relevant government agencies were also present<sup>10</sup>. The Minister expressed appreciation for the SHOUHARDO III program’s best practices towards reducing child marriage in hard-to-reach areas of the country and made a commitment for more effective collaboration towards this goal.

## Status of Study Recommendations:

The study team shared thirteen recommendations with the government and relevant stakeholders on the prevention of child marriage in Bangladesh. Among these recommendations, this policy brief is focusing specifically on the following four that require advocacy, persuasion, and influence:

- i. Ensuring the digitization of accurate birth registration certificates
- ii. Two-step verification of age-related information to prevent falsification of real birth information
- iii. Initiate the digitization of marriage registration
- iv. Follow-up and support mechanism for child marriage survivors

These above recommendations have been formulated after a review of existing progress and are shared in detail below:

<sup>10</sup> [https://shouhardo.carebangladesh.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-Child-Marriage-Study\\_SHOIII\\_Final-full-report.pdf](https://shouhardo.carebangladesh.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-Child-Marriage-Study_SHOIII_Final-full-report.pdf)

## ***i. Ensuring Digitization of Accurate Birth and Marriage Registration Certificates***

According to the Office of the Registrar General Birth and Death Registration (ORGBDR), birth registration increased to 21% in 2021 from year 2020<sup>11</sup>. Although this is a positive sign that the delivery of accurate digital birth registrations has made progress in recent years, there have been reports on the challenge of getting birth certificates at local levels<sup>12</sup>. Representatives of the local Union Parishad (UP), political leaders, and community representatives have expressed that they will remain vigilant to prevent falsified birth certificates. These parties have also invited interventions from the government (including the speedy uploading of entire birth registration data and capacity building of the staff) to enhance the process of digitizing birth certificates across the country. This study recommends initiating a digital marriage registration system so that all age and marriage-related information are stored digitally and can be verified. Community representatives, young girls and boys, and UP representatives have echoed that the initiation of a digital marriage registration system will significantly reduce the incidence of child marriage, as this eliminates the possibility to use falsified documents or hide information. However, this system has not yet been initiated by the government. The Ministry of Law, in collaboration with other relevant agencies of the Government, and the Access to Information Program (A2i) in the Prime Minister's Office, should take the required steps to initiate this process of digitization. In addition to these measures, there should be strong follow-up and support mechanisms, which are key to the sustainable prevention of child marriage. A key insight offered by the participants from the community consultations is that in some cases, a family may try to rearrange a postponed marriage a second time within six months by arranging the marriage in other relatives' houses in a different area than their own village. In this case, peer pressure and complaints from SHOUHARDO community members to monitor the situation has been a hallmark mechanism for prevention.

## ***ii. Two-step Verification of Age-related Information***

Another major recommendation to prevent child marriage is to ensure two-step age verification of the bride and groom before marriage. In this case, the two-step verification can be done by validating the birthdate on two types of documents: one from birth registration and one from school registration. This process will be helpful in preventing falsification or the hiding of real birth information. Unfortunately, the reality that has emerged is that there are sometimes inconsistencies between the two documents. This happens when information is hidden during school admission, and then the school admission reports are used to create birth certificates. To address this issue, the study strongly recommends that both the birth registration authority, ORGBDR and the academic authority, including the Ministry of Mass and Primary Education (MoMPE) and school authorities (School Management Committee and the Parents-Teacher Association), must take strict actions: a) ensure the use of accurate birthdates during school admission and b) issue a letter from the school authority to confirm the age of the bride at the time of marriage. Optimistically, it has been noted from consultations with different community representatives and government stakeholders, that academic parties have become more aware of this issue, and the rate of falsifications in school registrations is getting lower. Moreover, the government has already taken steps to create the Mobile Based Age Verification before Marriage Registration to Stop Child Marriage initiative through Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS). This activity was being implemented by the A2i, however, it unfortunately has not progressed much since the initial planning in 2017. The current scenario is the inaccessibility to get online birth registration due to the loss of all digital birth certificate data inserted before 2011, as the recruited ICT firm did not upload the pre-2011 data to the server and failed to notify the concerned authority of ORGBDR about the loss of the data. This error has made the situation even

<sup>11</sup> Over 10 million children under 5 with no birth registration | Dhaka Tribune

<sup>12</sup> Bangladesh's birth certificate trouble irritates citizens | bdnews24.com



more complex and uncertain. However, all the relevant actors should play an active role in digitizing birth registrations for two-step verification.

## Key Policy Asks and Recommendations

Based on the study findings and CARE's consultations with community representatives, a set of activities has been outlined that need to be implemented to prevent child marriage, particularly in Bangladesh's hard-to-reach Char and Haor regions.

- 1) Initiate Digital Birth and Marriage Certificate Registration and Two-step Verification:** The initiation of digital marriage certificates has now become a critical need to prevent the falsification of records. The government can engage the private sector in this process to provide necessary technological support. However, in addition to this, a two-step age verification needs to be strictly maintained. The two-step verification should include the verification of the accurate age of the bride and groom through birth certificates and an additional verification document, such as academic (school) registrations. In this case, both the birth registration authority, ORGBDR, and academic authority, such as MoMPE, have critical roles to play. The Bangladesh government has already demonstrated its commitment towards this digital verification with the 2017 initiative, Mobile Based Age Verification before Marriage Registration to Stop Child Marriage, planned in coordination with the CRVS and A2i. Again, to ensure accurate verification, all relevant actors must play an active role in this process: a) to ensure the use of accurate birthdates during school admission and b) issuance of a letter by the school authority to confirm the age of the bride. Moreover, before issuing the birth certificates, the UP representatives should thoroughly verify the recipient and their background. The marriage registrar should also carefully check the birth certificates before the marriage takes place. To ensure the success of these processes, the utilization of online birth registration needs to be improved.
- 2) Formation of Child Marriage Restraint Act Committees (CMRA):** The formation of Child Marriage Restraint Act Committees at district and sub-district levels is a must to effectively implement the 2017/2018 Child Marriage Restraint Act. Collaboration between these committees is very important, especially between the districts and the National Committee, which can monitor district-level progress in delivering the CMRA and provide aid where needed. The CMRAs will advocate for: a) ensuring the use of correct birth certificates, b) two-step verifications from multiple sources, rather than only birth registration certificates, c) digital marriage registration to prevent the falsification of adolescent girls' ages, and d) discard affidavit documents presented by parents that declare their (underage) children as adults. This affidavit will help the prevention of age change by the public notary in the locality. Already, 3 out of 64 districts (Rangpur, Sunamganj, and Kishoreganj) have initiated the formation of CMRA committees to prevent child marriage, which has been a milestone in the progression of child marriage prevention. This study strongly recommends that the Government of Bangladesh's Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) play a significant role in the formation and rollout of the CMRA committees across the country.
- 3) Alternative Livelihood and Incentives:** Families living in hard-to-reach areas are mostly dwelling in extreme poverty with very limited livelihood opportunities. Providing these families with alternative livelihood and income-generating opportunities will significantly reduce the incidence of child marriage. In addition, a longer-term incentive package may be introduced for families who commit to not arrange child marriages for their daughters. In this case, the government, private sector, and civil society must equally play their roles. The MoWCA can identify Poor and Extreme Poor (PEP) families with children and offer them financial and non-financial (based on survey and needs assessment) incentive packages to discourage child marriage. These incentive packages should provide a long-term plan specifically aimed towards the economic and social empowerment of adolescent girls at the community level. The government can use mobile finance-based safety net packages to encourage households to stop child marriages within their families, organize skill-oriented trainings, and include livelihood opportunities for parents and adolescent girls that empower them to stop their own marriages. Accordingly, infrastructural measures (establishment of schools, construction of bridges and

culverts) need to be undertaken in child marriage-prone areas (specifically Rangpur, Khulna, Rajshahi, and Barishal) to improve the overall economic status of the community, particularly in cases where poverty is the primary reason for child marriage<sup>13</sup>. Additionally, for alternative reasons, such as patriarchal and harmful social norms, the MoWCA can provide incentives for special services (healthcare, agriculture, etc.) to encourage the prevention of child marriage.

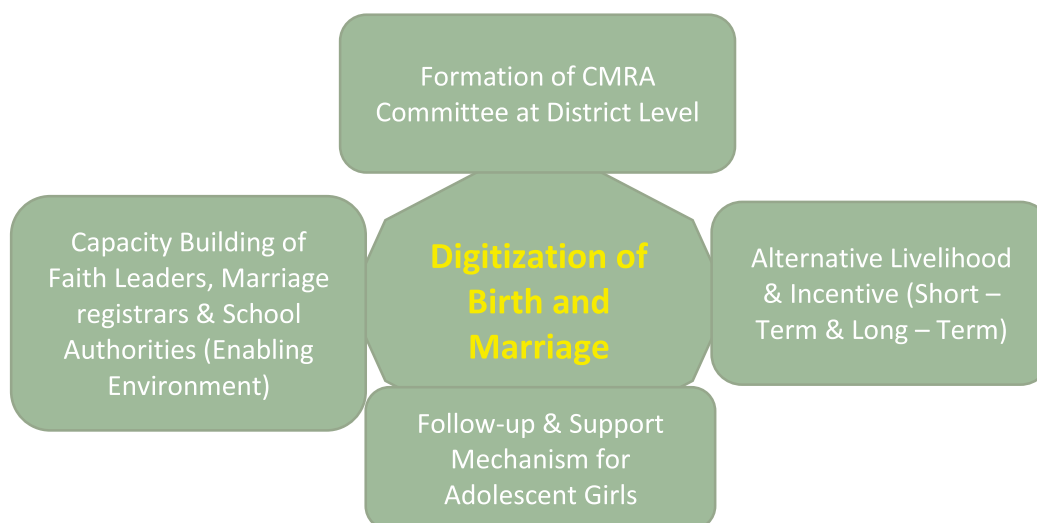
**4) Capacity Building of Faith Leaders, Local Marriage Registrars and School Authorities to Ensure an Enabling Environment for Adolescent Girls:** Capacity building of faith leaders, local marriage registrars, and school authorities is critical in the prevention of child marriage, as they are the most important stakeholders in conducting a marriage. However, study consultations with community representatives and government stakeholders have revealed that school authorities (School Management Committees and Parents-Teacher Associations) have strict roles to play to ensure the use of accurate birthdates, as well as in issuing a letter by the school authority to confirm the age of the bride. As such, additional outreach targeted towards these school authorities is also necessary. Organizing formal and informal trainings and awareness workshops in regular intervals will keep these parties engaged with the national campaign, ensure the accuracy of documentation, and help update the government and other relevant stakeholders on current situations in the districts. A useful entry point to these parties may be through the utilization of local/national forums and networks of faith leaders. Additionally, this study recommends the dissemination of fact-based messages on the costs and consequences of child marriage within a religious and futuristic purview.

**5) Follow-up and Support Mechanism for Adolescent Girls:** It is essential that there is an adequate follow-up and support mechanism in the community for adolescent girls and boys who have either stopped their own marriage or who have been rescued from the incident. The empowerment of adolescents is very important to the prevention of child marriage, and special attention should be placed on their re-enrollment in the academic system, particularly for young brides. To this end, the Government of Bangladesh can support local community groups to play vital roles in this process. A list of adolescent girls and boys should be developed by the community and shared with the UPs to track and follow their situations as part of a local Child Marriage Prevention System. The UP representatives, including the Chairperson and Members, should be vigilant and active in terms of mobilizing the local community-based organizations, particularly youth and adolescent groups, men, and faith leaders in the community. The local/village-based adolescent groups or any savings groups, such as the Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) groups, can also play a supportive role here. In particular, the adolescent girls' focal points can be especially critical in the prevention of child marriage within the community. The government committee to prevent violence against women, the UPNNPC, can routinely coordinate with adolescent girls' focal points by checking the list of adolescent girls and influence local marriage registrars to not authenticate the marriages of adolescent girls.

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<sup>13</sup> (PDF) Regional Variations in Child Marriage in Bangladesh(researchgate.net)

## Visual of Key Policy Asks and Recommendations



SHOUHARDO III (Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities) III is a Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA) funded by USAID and implemented by CARE.<sup>14</sup> It is designed to transform the lives of women and men of 549,000 poor and extremely poor (PEP) households in eight of the poorest and most marginalized districts in Northern Bangladesh. SHOUHARDO III mobilizes hundreds of community groups to take their own initiatives to prevent Child Marriage. Youth groups who work with community groups, women leaders, local custodians, and local government bodies tell real-life stories of the journey and struggles of their mothers, sisters and friends.

*“A girl studying in class six in our neighborhood was forced to get married. She did not want to be married off at such an early age and wanted to continue her studies. But her parents did not understand any of it. So my CG peers and I approached her parents. At first, they were not happy to see us and refused to listen to us. Later we convinced other adults in our community to talk to the parents and make them understand that child marriage is harmful to the girl and the community. Finally, we were able to make them understand, and they backed off from the marriage. The girl is now studying, and she is grateful to us.”* - Emran (17) is an adolescent boys’ Community Group member from Nolchhia, Haldia, Shagata, Gaibandha. This case in Textbox I shows the impact of SHOUHARDO III interventions and engagements to prevent child marriage at all levels by convincing the local male leaders, fathers, uncles, and brothers to engage men and boys, with support from CARE using our innovative approaches.

<sup>14</sup> SHOUHARDO III – Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities III ([carebangladesh.org](http://carebangladesh.org)) and SHOUHARDO-III-Program-Brief-2022.pdf ([carebangladesh.org](http://carebangladesh.org))

*“This document is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The content are the responsibility of CARE Bangladesh and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States.”*

### SHOUHARDO III

CARE Bangladesh

RAOWA Complex (Level 7), VIP Road

Mohakhali, Dhaka-I 206, Bangladesh

+8801306907327, +(880) 2-55058377-83

[bgd.shouhardoinfo@care.org](mailto:bgd.shouhardoinfo@care.org), <https://shouhardo.carebangladesh.org>