

# A Brief on the Child Marriage Study

Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) III is a Development Food Security Activity which aims to achieve improved gender equitable food and nutrition security and resilience for 168,500 Poor and Extreme Poor (PEP) households living in the eight districts of Northern Char and Haor wetland areas of Bangladesh. The program is funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and implemented by six Partner Non-Government Organizations.

## Background

In December 2017, the Bangladesh government passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 by repealing Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 to minimize the prevalence of child marriage. The act was welcomed for its increased focus on stronger law enforcement and stringent punishment. Despite the continued efforts by the government and different NGOs, Bangladesh still has the fourth-highest child marriage rate in the world.<sup>1</sup> The 2019 UNFPA population report revealed that 59% of girls (below 18 years old) in Bangladesh became

the victim of child marriage and highest among the South Asian countries.<sup>2</sup> Some of the recent national statistics<sup>3</sup> published in the newspapers<sup>4</sup> suggested that the prevalence of child marriage increased during the pandemic. SHOUHARDO III already launched a social awareness campaign to address violence against women. This study is an extended effort targeted to a specific form of violence - forced child marriage in the program implementing areas.

## Objective

The consultation is part of an ongoing study that aims to –

To explore the enablers and the drivers of change for child marriage;

To capture good practices of the program resulting in the prevention of child marriage.

To look into the agency<sup>5</sup> and coping strategy of young girls who were able to prevent their marriage under the age of 18 in the program implementing areas;

## Methodology

The study primarily applied a qualitative approach along with secondary sources. The study location included all eight districts of SHOUHARDO III. Considering the current circumstances and restrictions on mass gathering and mobility, the program collected data through webinars. Eight webinars were conducted at the district level followed by two at the regional level. The national webinar will be in November 2020. The webinar applied a bottom-up approach to sharing findings and insights. A total of 240 participants attended ten webinars. It included 93 program participants, 30 young girls (who delayed/postponed their marriage), 11 adolescent brides who became the victim of child marriage, and 52 parents/legal guardians. In addition, 78 respondents from the gatekeeper category (including community leaders, marriage registers, religious leaders, UP representatives, and schoolteachers) were included in the webinars. The study included 31 representatives from NGOs and media. Moreover, 38 representatives from relevant government departments (including the department of social

services, department of women affairs, Bangladesh police, judiciary, civil surgeons, and deputy commissioners) were included in the webinars. For two divisional-level webinars, 62 participants attended and a greater number of them represented at the district-level webinars as well. One divisional commissioner and one additional divisional commissioner was included in the regional webinars.

Findings and discussion summary from these webinars will be shared at two regional webinars, one on char and another in haor. The program already collated findings from the district and regional levels. Now, the program intends to organize a national webinar with the representation from the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and other key stakeholders. This national webinar will create an opportunity for the program to share effective strategies and tactics applied by young girls and others at the community level to prevent child marriage and publish a policy brief on that.

## Findings

**Reasons:** poverty, insecurity, perceived 'good grooms', perceived misuse of mobile phones (by girls).

**Consequences:** health hazards, malnutrition, generational poverty, domestic violence including sexual violence, lack of employment opportunities

**Brave girls' narrative:** sought support from peers, local community group members, and occasionally from school teachers, UP members. They learned about the negative consequences of child marriage from group discussions (facilitated by SHOUHARDO III) and schools. Almost all of them experienced social stigma (e.g., neighbors shaming their parents). Although they stood out through negative comments and exploitative social norms, some resumed their studies and some got engaged in skill-based employment.

**Preventive measures:** A range of preventive measures were taken by school teachers (classroom awareness session), UP members (awareness-raising session with community people), NGOs (adolescent club activities, community groups), different government departments (hotline, coordination with school, special committee, workshops), marriage registers and faith leaders (moral obligation and one-to-one conversation).

**Parents' perspective:** key decision-maker regarding their daughter's marriage; often influenced by relatives and neighbors on the perceived idea of getting their daughters a 'good groom'. Fathers seemed to have a greater voice compared to mothers while deciding on the marriage, the potential groom, and the time.

**Challenges:** difficult to reach remote communities with awareness messaging, school closure (due to the COVID-19 pandemic), 'special provision' under the Child Marriage Restraint Act, issuing 'fake' birth registration certificates, unregistered marriage, and inconsistent implementation of the Act.

1. [http://fmcnet.pvt.iisd.org/sites/default/files/fmcdbnet-portal/gov/Ldf/publications/10-417...\\_16-00\\_429f\\_andf\\_a79dd03325e7/Brief%20on%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Bangladesh.pdf](http://fmcnet.pvt.iisd.org/sites/default/files/fmcdbnet-portal/gov/Ldf/publications/10-417..._16-00_429f_andf_a79dd03325e7/Brief%20on%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Bangladesh.pdf), cited on 2 July 2020.

2. [https://arabidsp.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/SWP19%20English-report-Web\\_0.pdf](https://arabidsp.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/SWP19%20English-report-Web_0.pdf), cited on 2 July 2020.

3. <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-child-marriages-in-june-mif-1929097>, cited on 10 September 2020.

4. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/07/09/parents-using-pandemic-as-opportunity-to-marry-off-underage-daughters>, cited on 9 September 2020.

5. Kabeer defined agency as the ability to define one's priorities and work on those (Kabeer, 1999). It can take the forms of 'power to' (positive: capacity to define choices and pursuing their own goals, even when face obstacles) and 'power over' (negative: the capacity of people to create barriers for others to demonstrate agency through violence, force) (Ibid).

# Recommendations

## 1 Accurate birth registration certificates

There are two stages this can be checked. Firstly, while issuing it for the first time from the Union Parishad. The UP representatives should check the background and the recipient of the birth certificates carefully before issuing. Secondly, checking the birth certificates carefully by marriage registrars when the marriage is about to take place. The utilization of online birth registration needs to be improved.

## 2 Two-step verification

The participants suggested that multiple sources of age verification will minimize existing challenges. Md. Abdul Latif Mia, the representative of Gaibandha district Police suggested that the marriage registration should be conducted through multiple documents instead of only birth registration certificates. The process may include a letter issued by the school authority.

## 3 Online marriage registration

One of the UP members suggested to digitize the marriage registration process in order to avoid the adulteration of adolescent girls' age. This recommendation was highly appreciated by the regional webinars' participants.

## 4 Follow-up or support mechanism

It will be effective to set up a follow-up and support mechanism for the adolescent girls and her family who stopped their child marriage. A lack of such a system often defeats the success of preventing child marriage as parents succumb to societal pressure and rearrange child marriage again.

## 5 Discard affidavit documents

(mis)-used by parents to claim that their (underage) children are adults. Sadia Afsana Rima, the District Legal Aid Officer from Kishoreganj clarified, "The affidavit is only a declaration, it does not validate the marriage in any way and we all have to internalize this information. Muslim marriage can be legally conducted through the Nikah ceremony and marriage registration only." This also includes the prevention of age change by the notary public in the locality.

## 6 Strict practices from marriage registrars

Do not allow parents or underage children to go through child marriage. A fine and jail time is in place, but the marriage registrars are rarely reported for their misdeeds. The reporting system should be improved. Raising awareness on how to report these gatekeepers should be incorporated in community-level awareness meetings.

## 7 Develop and promote female community influencers

To work as role models similar to BRAC's initiative in Kishoreganj. This program<sup>6</sup> is implementing community-led initiatives and a network of 25-40 women was developed at the community level to work against child marriage. Community-level initiatives work better in collaboration with government organizations. A network with the local Department of Women Affairs can be established with the community influencers to better monitor and prevent child marriage.

## 8 Increase access to birth control commodities

For grassroots people, especially adolescents. The aim is to stop already married child brides to get pregnant before they turn 18. A representative from BNPS (Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha) suggested incorporating the SRHR concept in school-level activities and utilizing the government's 'school cabinet' approach to raising awareness among the school students.

## 9 Include and engage men in the discussions

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## 10 Develop and disseminate interactive and interesting communication materials

To attract different crowds from different age groups. For instance, video documentary for the age groups above 40, Facebook posts and campaigns for the age group below 30, and many more. Different forms can appeal to the different crowd as well, such as street dramas, Jatra, Baul song, Bhatiali songs to promote the negative impact of child marriage.

## 11 Build a network of adolescent girls and boys

Who will continue to monitor each other and inform the right authorities when child marriage is taking place. Making a list/database of adolescents in the community and engaging them in looking after each other by community-level public service providers and NGO workers.

## 12 Marriage registration at the Union level

Rather than the village-level to prevent parents from taking their daughters to another village to arrange child marriage.

## 13 Increasing income-generating opportunities

In the remote areas as most of the cases of child marriage took place due to the poverty issue. The Project Coordinator of Unnayan Sangha shared that boys/men easily migrate to the cities in quest of work while young girls end up as the victim of child marriage. The study findings also suggested that livelihood opportunities for adolescent girls empowered them to stop their marriages.



To express your solidarity to stop violence against women, join  
"It ends with me" campaign:  
<https://www.facebook.com/ItEndsWithMe20>

6. <http://www.brac.net/program/integrated-development/>, cited on 2 November 2020.

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