



**MMS Bulletin #163**

*Teenagerschwangerschaften: Eine Herausforderung für Kommunen und Regierungen*

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***Efforts to end child marriage in Bangladesh***

**Child marriage – the fuel to teenage pregnancies**

Von Golnar Ghazivakili und Muriel Weyermann

*Although they have been outlawed for centuries, Bangladesh remains the country with the second highest rate of child marriages. Girls who are married off at a young age are often pressured to get pregnant as soon as possible, which makes child marriage a catalyzing factor for teenage pregnancies. They become housewives and mothers, which leaves them with no education or prospects in the employment market. If we want to combat teenage pregnancy, we must simultaneously tackle the continued forcing of young girls into marriage. Women's Hope International is working in Bangladesh to reduce child marriage and sustainably change misconceptions.*



*During Karate training, girls in our ECM project learn practical defence strategies and develop self-confidence.*  
Photo: © WHI

## ***Child marriage: A cultural crisis***

A third of Bangladeshi girls is married off before the age of 18. This inevitably leads to early teenage pregnancies, which brings many health risks and diminishes their access to education and employment. They remain in the poverty spiral and face the risk of suffering from obstetric fistula, a birth injury leading to constant pain, incontinence, and social exclusion. Moreover, girls who are physically and emotionally not mature enough to conceive have a higher risk of dying during pregnancy or childbirth (UNFPA, 2022). Furthermore, studies show that babies who are born to teenage mothers can have lower survival rates (ibid.). Teenage pregnancy thus increases when girls are denied their sexual and reproductive rights (Plan International, 2022).

The high rate of child marriage and subsequent teenage pregnancies is mainly due to cultural factors and occurs mostly in poverty-stricken areas of Bangladesh. One deciding aspect is women's social standing. In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, women and girls are denied the right to control their own bodies. Their roles in society are fixed as child bearers and care givers. Unmarried women are bestowed with low social standing and are prone to sexual harassment and rape. Fear of social stigmatization leads families to believe that marrying their daughter is the morally right choice. As wives, girls are seemingly protected from other men.

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Although national laws have been in place to prohibit child marriage for centuries, and revised in 2017 to the “Child Marriage Restraint Act”, they are easily bypassed, due to a “special provisions”. Due to a corrupt political system, those who permit child marriage are rarely prosecuted because they are well connected with powerful people in relevant institutions. There is thus a certain impunity for illegally marrying a child and forcing it into teenage motherhood. Moreover, only a third of the children in rural areas possesses a birth certificate, and their age is often forged on the marriage certificate (Plan International, 2020).

Teenage pregnancy is often also tied to a lack of understanding and communication of contraception for young girls who have or will be married off. Sexual health and birth control are taboo in the majority of religious communities of Bangladesh. Hence, often girls are not offered education on their contraceptive choices and safe sex. This is also due to the patriarchal and religious ideal of women as child bearers and the idea that sex is only permissible when it results in reproduction.

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*During Karate training, girls in our ECM project learn practical defence strategies and develop self-confidence. Photo: © WHI*

## ***Our Ending Child Marriage Project in Parbatipur, Bangladesh***

Together with our local partner organization LAMB, Women's Hope has implemented a project with the aim to combatting child marriage for the last four years (mid-2018 – mid-2022) in Parbatipur, which is a large district in Northern Bangladesh, counting 300'000 residents, who live in one of the lowest income settings of the country.

The focus lied not merely in preventing forced marriages, but also in detecting early married girls who need support in making their own decisions and offering them information on the dangers of child marriage as well as access to health services.

Measures taken to put an end to child marriage and teenage pregnancies in Bangladesh confront the different aspects discussed above. They intend to reduce cultural, social, and financial factors which catalyze child marriage and are divided in desired project outcomes:

- Girls are empowered in decision making and their social role is improved: In ten districts, Women's Hope and LAMB have created 30 safe spaces for girls in which they can meet within a safe environment and share their experiences on taboo topics. Women who have high social standing in the community lead the safe spaces and help girls to combat infringement on their rights such as sexual harassment, a looming marriage, violence and abuse. Additionally, they receive life skill training on adolescent health and life skills. Furthermore, girls obtain leadership training as change agents to lead individual groups in which they share information, organize sport tournaments and initiate events to increase

public awareness. Moreover, change agents organize groups like wedding busters who intervene in illegal child marriages, or theatre groups who educate their audience on child marriage.

- Families and communities are informed and mobilized: Together with local groups, child protection agencies, health centers, religious leaders, school administration and political leaders, the project team works to educate citizens on child marriage and their social and health repercussions. The goal for those “child welfare groups” is to create more groups to actively combat child marriage. Furthermore, “child protection groups”, i.e., parents and male relatives contributing to the project, share their experiences in supporting girls.
- Girls have access to health services, income and education: To support especially vulnerable girls such as orphans and girls from extremely poor families, the project offers income generating activities such as goat farming or sewing courses. They obtain seed capital and know-how to generate additional income for themselves and their families. Together with their husbands, already married girls receive guidance and are encouraged to continue their education and not to get pregnant right away. Girls who struggle at school are also offered tutoring. Additionally, the project offers training in sexual and reproductive health for teachers and health workers in order to spread awareness and create allies for girls in school. In every health center, “adolescent corners” concerning reproductive health for teenagers were installed. This is to decrease girl’s inhibitions to seek help and increase access to health services.
- Mechanism of laws and policies to protect children and adolescents are intact: The project team has reinforced child protection agencies by educating group members and examining whether they take responsibility to act against child marriage. Women’s Hope and LAMB create processes which facilitate the registration of births together with local communities and politicians. Lastly, religious leaders receive training to learn how to verify a girl’s age in an online database to ensure that only those legally allowed receive a marriage certificate.

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## **Limitations and Setbacks due to the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has unfortunately also taken its toll on our project. Educational institutions were closed for 18 months, 543 days – one of the world’s longest coronavirus shutdowns (Aljazeera, 2021).

During lockdown, more underaged girls at risk of getting married off as they were forced to stay home from school (UNICEF, 2021). During the COVID-19 crisis, the project postponed activities which required mass gathering, and project staff restricted field movement due to the lockdown. However, they continued e-based communication with various stakeholders, community people, and adolescents. They also advocated to get support for the most vulnerable pregnant women and mothers through food packages.



Training leaders. Photo: © WHI

## **Sustainable Help**

Women's Hope works to ensure the sustainability of the project to end child marriage by directly including families and communities. Permanent change can only be sustained in an environment willing to adapt their cultural misconceptions. Therefore, those involved in the project take ownership and responsibility. Some illustrative preliminary results of the end line evaluation are as follows:

- Compared to the beginning of the project (28%), 93 % of married girls are now empowered to make their own decisions regarding appropriate health services. Regarding unmarried girls the improvement was from 17% to 99%.
- While at the beginning of the project, 20% of adolescent girls postponed their pregnancy for one year after the marriage, now 65.4% married girls will take time for the 1st pregnancy while 79.3% unmarried adolescent girls will delay their first pregnancy.

- 42% all girls (in school and out of school) between 14-18 years who had an adolescent health question or problem in the previous 3 months seek assistance at the health centres, compared to 30% at baseline.

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## **A Glimpse into the New Phase**

Due to the project's success and its evident necessity in fighting child marriage, Women's Hope continues to work with LAMB on the Ending Child Marriage project in Bangladesh.

Incorporating the feedback of girls and women during the field visit in February 2022 and the recommendations of the end line report, an additional focus will lie on integrating boys in the process of educating and awareness raising. If sustainable change is to be achieved, boys must become allies to girls' empowerment. The project will profit from men's role in delaying marriage at a young age and ideally preventing child marriage. Additionally, including boys could also have a positive effect towards gender equality. Men and boys' engagement with women's issues alongside them is vital to achieve lasting change in social norms.

Women's Hope together with LAMB will continue to strive for a world in which girls and women have control over their own bodies and can exercise their reproductive and sexual rights

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