

Messaging framework: Bangladesh government plans to reduce minimum age of marriage to 16

This note outlines key messages from members of *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage* who are based in Bangladesh, in response to government plans to reduce the minimum age of marriage for girls from 18 to 16 years old.

Top-line message:

Reducing the minimum age of marriage would be a major step backwards for Bangladesh.

We urge the government to maintain the minimum age of marriage for girls at 18 and to develop a comprehensive response to address child marriage in partnership with civil society.

Supporting messages

Changing the age of marriage does not prevent the harmful effects of child marriage

We are pleased that the government of Bangladesh has committed to addressing child marriage. At the Girl Summit in July 2014 Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina committed to creating a National Plan of Action by the end of 2014, revising the Child Marriage Restraint Act, ending the marriage of under 15 year olds and reducing by one third marriages of girls between 15-18 years by 2021.

However, reducing the age of marriage is not the way to end child marriage and ensure that all girls in Bangladesh have a bright future.

Marrying before 18 has severe consequences for girls' and their communities' health, education, and future prosperity.

Proof points:

- The health risks of pregnancy and childbirth drop significantly after a girl is 18:
 - Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death in girls aged 15-19 in low- and middle-income countries. 90% of adolescent pregnancies in the developing world are to girls who are already married.
 - Where girls survive childbirth, they are at increased risk of post pregnancy-related complications. For example, 65% of all cases of obstetric fistula occur in girls under the age of 18.
 - At approximately 18, pelvic growth is complete for girls. Immature maternal pelvic size contributes to infant morbidity and mortality, leaving infants born to adolescent mothers more vulnerable.
- Girls who marry young usually drop out of school. They do not receive the educational and economic opportunities that help lift them and their communities out of poverty.
- Child marriage has major implications for a country's economy.
 - A study by UNICEF in Nepal found that the economic cost of just the loss of schooling due to child marriage was 3.87% of GDP.

Marrying a girl off as a child does *not* ensure her safety; it exposes her to violence and risk

In many cases parents feel it is in their daughter's best interest to marry at a young age: they believe marriage will protect her against physical or sexual assault. Yet, this belief is mistaken.

Child marriage puts girls at risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence throughout their lives.

Proof points:

- Girls who marry as children are more likely to be beaten or threatened by their husbands than girls who marry later.
- Girls who marry as children are also more likely to describe their first sexual experience as forced.
- As minors, child brides are rarely able to assert their wishes to their husbands or their in-laws. They are more likely to believe that a man is sometimes justified in beating his wife than women who marry later.

Enforce the current laws; don't change the minimum age of marriage

Laws that set a minimum age of marriage are only effective if they are enforced. Bangladesh should develop a robust legal and policy framework for preventing child marriage and supporting married girls, with adequate resources for effective implementation.

Bangladesh should improve awareness and training among law enforcement officials and other relevant professionals to ensure that laws are understood, implemented and enforced.

Ending child marriage will not be achieved by laws alone

Laws that set a minimum age for marriage are important because they help to emphasise that child marriage is not acceptable. However, laws alone are not enough. They must be part of a broader set of approaches, e.g.:

- **Invest in girls:** through girls' empowerment clubs, safe space groups, role models and mentors.
- **Provide options for girls** other than marriage and motherhood: education (safe, accessible, affordable schools), schemes for economic empowerment.
- **Work with traditional leaders, men and boys, as well as the wider community:** Successful programmes to delay marriage include those that encourage dialogue among communities about the benefits of delaying marriage.

Bangladesh will still be under the spotlight

- Internationally-reported rates of child marriage will continue to be measured as the percentage of women age 20-24 who were married before the age of 18.
- Bangladesh will still have one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world.
- Bangladesh has the highest rate of marriage in the world for girls aged under 15. The new law will not change this, nor will it make addressing child marriage more manageable.
- Changing the age of marriage conflicts with Bangladesh's human rights obligations. For example, Bangladesh is signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child which defines a child as anyone under 18.

Bangladesh has an opportunity to demonstrate what can be done to end child marriage: develop and resource a national action plan

- Bangladesh is already home to innovative programmes to address child marriage.
- Government, development partners and civil society must work together to take these programmes to scale and reach many more girls.
- To maximise the impact of efforts to end child marriage, *all* government ministries have to be involved.