

PRESS RELEASE

EXPERTS ON CHILD MARRIAGE FOCUS ON Empowerment OF GIRLS

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Experts at a consultation convened by the SHOKHI Consortium and Population Council called for support of the need to take a multi-dimensional, longer-term and holistic approach to programmes which take into account dimensions such as realized rights, health and access to education. They called for reconsidering approaches that exclusively rely on a cost-benefit framework using single-focus indicators without taking into account the intrinsic value of adolescent agency choice and voice.



Caption: From left to right HE Leoni Cuelenaere, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Dr Noor Mohammad of PSTC, Dr Sajeda Amin of the Population Council and Dr Niaz Asadullah of the University of Malaya.

The SHOKHI Consortium (led by BLAST and including Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition, Marie Stopes and Population Council) jointly convened this expert consultation on 'Evidence Based Strategies for Ending Child Marriage: Why Empowerment Matters' at the BRAC Centre Inn, Dhaka.

Dr Sajeda Amin, Population Council, said, "Bangladesh has a lot to offer towards promoting a theory of change and on what works to influence decisions about child marriage. Collectively,

we have a large body of experience and emerging evidence based on what works for whom. It is time now to think about how to apply this towards identifying strategic priorities”.

Dr Noor Mohammad, Executive Director, PSTC, spoke about the BALIKA project, which encourages girls to participate in the BALIKA centres, which are considered as interactive and safe platforms for girls to talk about issues of gender, rights and early marriage. The project also explored the reasons behind early school dropout, finding which subjects girls were struggling with, including maths and English, and provided them tuition on these subjects.

Najranalmaan, Barrister described the SHOKHI Project which seeks to address socio-economic rights of women and girls in slums, and noted “Working in the field gives us a unique opportunity to understand the challenges of working on child marriage in the urban context. Populations in urban slums are very mobile and follow-up on specific cases and direct interventions is challenging where there is no security of tenure.”

Professor M. NiazAsadullah, University of Malaya, discussed the “Theory of Change: Why empowerment is important matters for preventing child marriage.” He emphasised financial incentive-based interventions to child marriage, highlighting that a quick fix solution cannot be sought by merging the problem into one of poverty and finance. The presentation focused on qualitative evidence and drew on a review of recent studies on child marriage and existing programmes – this research also highlighted how social customs instead of financial constraints govern marriage decisions in rural Bangladesh.

Dr. SayemaBidisha, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, spoke about cash transfer programmes, highlighting the fact that they address short term objectives, but are not designed to support the longer term objective of empowering women in such a way so that they come into the labour force.

Dr. Zulfiqar Ali, Research Director, BRAC International, spoke about the prevalence of child marriage in different geographical locations of the country. Speaking about complementary approaches to addressing child marriage, he stressed the importance of education, economic empowerment and empowerment of mothers.

Dr. Shahnaz Huda, Department of Law, Dhaka University, called for the need to amend laws such as the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, and for sustainable interventions to include door to door services to address child marriage.

Sara Hossain, Honorary Executive Director, BLAST, discussed the need to address the use of the law as a strategy to address child marriage, not only by focusing on punishment in individual cases, but by informing campaigns for prevention of child marriage. She urged the need for campaigners to focus on seeking consistency in the range of laws that affect the age of majority including the Majority Act and the Penal Code, as well as discriminatory personal laws that allow for child marriage. The focus on enforcement of law should address offences of sexual

violence such as marital rape, stalking and sexual harassment, in addition to child marriage and forced marriage.

Dr. Julia Ahmed, Independent Consultant, spoke about how to build a supportive environment, discussing who the core actors are within this structure. She appreciated the sexual health policy of the government, but pointed out the need for adolescent health corners to better cater to the needs of adolescents.

Dr. Ruchira Tabassum Naved, Senior Scientist, Health Systems and Population Studies Division, ICDDR'b, discussed the focus over women's virginity in patriarchal societies and the tendency to control women's sexuality. She spoke about the varied importance given to virginity in different countries and the social norms surrounding marriage, and of the link of the family and community's honour to the normative behaviour of women and girls, and the prevalence of victim blaming. She raised concerns on "love marriages" in slum areas which are deemed to be consensual, and raised the question of how informed such consent is.



From left to right: Dr Julia Ahmed, Dr Sajeda Amin, Dr Ruchira Tabassum Naved of ICDDR,B.

Her Excellency, Leoni Cuelenaere, Ambassador of the Netherlands, noted the impressive advance made by Bangladesh in improving maternal and child health and called for urgent action to reduce the number of child brides, stating: "To achieve the Sustainable Development

Goals by 2030 and uphold the human rights of women and girls, we must act now to end child marriage. The provision for lowering the age of marriage of girls to 16 with the consent of parents or guardians could legitimize the current tradition of marrying girls off at a young age which could in turn lead to an increase in child marriage.”

Background:

The SHOKHI Consortium(led by BLAST and including Bangladesh Women’s Health Coalition, Marie Stopes and WE Can) along with Population Council jointly convened an expert consultation today on ‘Evidence Based Strategies for Ending Child Marriage: Why Empowerment Matters’ at BRAC Centre Inn, Dhaka.

While Bangladesh has seen great improvements in social sector programmes, it is also a global hotspot for child marriage, and has become a test bed for policy experiments on how to end child marriage. The Bangladesh experience has much to offer for countries trying to undertake similar programmes in South Asia and elsewhere. At present, multiple government and non-government interventions are ongoing to address the practice of child marriage, through prevention and protection. They include education focused schemes, rights-based solutions and schemes that emphasize financial incentives including conditional cash transfers. The main concept paper "Can Conditional Transfers Eradicate Child Marriage?" outlining the argument of the keynote speakers at the consultation is available online from the link <http://ftp.iza.org/pp118.pdf>.

The participants included practitioners implementing programmes to address child marriage, economists, demographers, human rights lawyers and experienced, researchers on gender equality.

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