

A UNITED CIVIL SOCIETY INFLUENCING NATIONAL POLICY ON CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh continues to have one of the highest child marriage rates worldwide, and the highest rate of marriage for girls under 15. 59% of girls are married by their 18th birthday, and 18% by the age of 15.

Child marriage is deeply embedded in cultural and religious beliefs. Drivers include poverty, parents' desire to secure economic and social security for their daughters, and the perceived need to protect girls from harm, including from sexual harassment. Harmful gender and cultural norms remain a big challenge, and families traditionally do not value girls equal to boys. Furthermore, girls from poor families are more likely to become child brides; dowry prices increase the older a girl gets.

Girls Not Brides Bangladesh was formed in 2013. It has over 25 members, which range from small grassroots organisations to country offices of larger INGOs.

The National Partnership provides solidarity in a difficult policy environment, and credibility for community organisations at the national level

Civil society started campaigning against a clause within the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 2016, before it came into effect in 2017. The clause allows marriages for girls under 18 in “special cases” or for “the greater good of the adolescent”, but with no detail of what these exceptional cases are. Realising this work was hindered by working in silos, alliances united to push back against



the legislative changes. The Child Rights Advocacy Coalition in Bangladesh, youth advocates and *Girls Not Brides* Bangladesh coordinated their campaigning, sharing the same language and messaging in their collective advocacy efforts and external communications.

“[Being a] national partnership helps when working on a collective issue; we get invited because we are part of a global partnership. That adds value to our work as people realise that we are not working in isolation,” says Tania Zaman, Plan International Bangladesh, secretariat of *Girls Not Brides* Bangladesh.

Although the clause was ultimately included in the Act, as a collective *Girls Not Brides* Bangladesh and other alliances were successful in stalling the government for over a year. Their collaborative work strengthened the National Partnership, as Tania explains “For the first time we were all speaking with one voice....when girls’ rights and child rights come together, that is the power of civil society.”

Leveraging relationships with key decision-makers, a sub-group of the National Partnership was asked to work with the government on the rules for implementing the Act. This enabled the partnership to influence the implementation of the Act, and ensure that the special provision is only implemented in very specific cases to protect the rights of a girl.

Momentum is growing within the group to ensure that those working on child marriage continue to collaborate under one umbrella, work collectively, and convene to raise their voices.

“We worked together, pooled resources and found commonality and purpose, which binds us all together. From there, we need to explore further collective action,” says Tania.

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GIRLS NOT BRIDES

The Global Partnership
to End Child Marriage

www.GirlsNotBrides.org

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