

Report on Child Marriage Free Unions

Plan Bangladesh

March 2013



Background

Plan Bangladesh has been operating in Bangladesh since 1994 and works in six districts¹ across the country. Plan Bangladesh has developed an integrated community development program using the rights based Child-Centred Community Development (CCCD) approach. Since 2005, a core area of work for Plan Bangladesh has been to stop child marriage. In its Country Strategic Plan 2010-2015, Plan Bangladesh takes reduction of child marriage in rural areas as one of its programme objectives.² Whereas nationally 64% women get married before 18 years, in Plan intervention areas this number currently stands at 57%.

At the Programme Unit (PU)³ level, the objective is to increase the mean age of girls at marriage from 15 to 18⁴ years in all Plan programme areas by 2015, which includes strengthening government mechanisms by supporting its online birth registration system and enforcement of the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929). The programme includes advocacy initiatives at national and local levels, awareness raising activities at community level on child marriage, capacity building of children to say no to child marriage and the promotion of community based organizations of children and adults to actively work to stop child marriage. Plan Bangladesh also undertakes research initiatives⁵ to ensure that learning is captured and fed back into quality programming.

Continuous and concerted action has brought remarkable achievements in recent years in reducing child marriage incidences in the Plan intervention areas. One example is the declaration of **Child Marriage Free Unions** in 22 zones (unions) where Plan Bangladesh is working at present. These are located in Nilphamari, Dinajpur, Lalmonirhat (the rural north of Bangladesh) and Gazipur districts.

Union: “Child Marriage Free”

Union Parishads (UP) or just *Union* are the smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh. A Union Parishad is the body primarily responsible for administrative, law and order and community development within the local limits of the union.

Child marriage free union is a process to strategize activities around a bigger goal towards putting an end to this practice. Therefore, Child Marriage Free Union is a movement led by local government and facilitated by Plan Bangladesh and other like-minded NGOs, Local Government Institutions, religious

¹ Dhaka (based in metropolitan area), Gazipur (based in Sreepur Upazila), Dinajpur (based in Khansama upazila), Lalmonirhat (based in Hatibandha upazila), Nilphamari (based in Jaldhaka upazila) and Barguna (Sadar Upazila).

² *Bangladesh Country Strategic Plan: July 2010- June 2015*, Plan Bangladesh

³ PU are district level offices of Plan Bangladesh through which program activities are implemented

⁴ 18 is the legal age of marriage for girls in Bangladesh. And for boys it is 21 years.

⁵ Asia Child Marriage Initiative (ACMI) research has been one of the flagship programme for more integrated programme design on Child Marriage.

leaders, marriage registrars, CSOs, Child Organizations (CO) and community people with an aim to stop child marriage in the respective Unions. The movement includes a formal declaration. This declaration is made by the UP (local government) in a formal meeting stating that - “from today this union is child marriage free”; the declaration commits all in collectively working to stop child marriage in respective unions. In these unions, child marriage is strongly prohibited and a punishable offence in line with the existing law. This is contrast to the situation nationally, whereby people do not adhere to the Child Marriage Restraint Act due to lack of knowledge of its existence or because there are minimal consequences when it is breached (1 month in prison or the equivalent to a \$12.50 fine – although neither has been known to be imposed). The movement in Plan’s working areas has led to a remarkable reduction in child marriage incidents as recent findings from both internal and external studies⁶ show.



Photo: Declaration of Child Marriage free union in Plan Intervention Areas – *the fact that it is dominated by men is part of the success: men are the kev decision makers for child marriaae*

Child Marriage Free Unions: Where are they?

Plan Bangladesh activities centre on working with government and different stakeholders to stop child marriage. So far **22 out of 39 unions in Plan’s coverage area in Lalmonirhat, Dinajpur, Nilphamari and Gazipur districts** have been declared as child marriage free since 2005. This comprises coverage of a total population of **596,653** reached.

Table 1: Population of unions declared Child Marriage Free

Name of District	Upazila(sub-district)	No of Unions declared child marriage free	Total Population size covered ⁷
Dinajpur	Khansama	1	26,755
Gazipur	Sreepur	3	110,254
Lalmonirhat	Hatibandha	6	118,972
Nilphamari	Jaldhaka	12	340,672
Total population covered by child marriage free unions			596,653

⁶ Baseline, APPR(Annual Participatory Programme Review) 2012, Asia Child Marriage Initiative(ACMI) Research

⁷ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2011)

Plan's approach

Plan's programming to stop child marriage is with an integrated approach. Activities not only focus on awareness building but also on motivating relevant stakeholders to take responsibility for stopping child marriage. For example, Plan establishes linkages with community leaders to change social norms around the issue of child marriage. Plan's presence in the community is recognized by the local leaders, who are appreciative of the outreach made possible with Plan's efforts. Plan has facilitated the formation of different community based groups to stop child marriage; for example, Child Protection Groups (CPGs)⁸, have been formed as a watchdog in Plan intervention areas on any child abuse related cases, including this issue. CPG members comprise of influential persons who have access to getting support when required from health, legal and other services so as to support a prompt response to individual cases. They also have strong influencing skills within the community to stop child marriage from taking place.

Plan also promotes Children's Organizations (COs) who are capacitated through life-skills training so that they become empowered to negotiate and delay their own marriage and that of their friends/ peers. Through these groups, Plan has been trying to create a model where children and youth are empowered to contribute to delaying or preventing child marriage in their communities. They go house to house to convince parents of the ills of child marriage, they meet regularly to discuss any dropouts from school/ child peers who they know are at risk of marriage, and they subsequently report the cases to elders in the community, as well as take decisive action themselves.

Case study

Dilruba is 22. She lives in a village of Jaldhaka. She got married when she was 21. It was not easy at first place. She had to take several strategies to delay her marriage. She had been working with different local level NGOs and she also was a member of Children's Organisation promoted by plan. When her parents tried to married her off before turning 18, she took the help of Plan staff members and Children's Organisation to delay her marriage being the active member of the Children's Organisation. Once her parents almost fixed her marriage before 18, she shaved her hair to look unattractive so that the marriage could be stopped. This is how she managed to delay the marriage. She believes her strength was the support of the Children's Organisation in her village. Being a member of that group made her aware on the consequences of child marriage and she also get to know the legal age of marriage. Not only she managed to stop her marriage but also she tried to be on track to continue her study to follow her dreams to find a god job. She asserts "our union is child marriage free, no child marriage happens here".

A summary of some of the key interventions undertaken by Plan's programme are as follows:

- Advocacy workshop/meeting where duty bearers (Local Government Institute representatives, government officials) participated at upazila and district level in Plan's child marriage programming areas
- Campaign on Birth registration, including online birth registration so that ages cannot be falsified for child marriage.

⁸ Child Protection Groups (CPGs) are groups formed involving different community level stakeholders including children to protect children from abuse and harm and focuses on responding and reporting cases of Child Protection including child marriage in respective areas. CPGs are community-based mechanisms for protecting children in Plan intervention areas.

- Adolescents from Children’s Organisations are trained on life skills to build their capacity to stop child marriage in their communities
- Networks on children and women’s affairs established in Upazila and district level of all programming areas. These networks are built for collective actions and they work on taking immediate steps to stop child marriage in the respective areas.
- Child marriage prevented by community based child protection mechanisms called “Child Protection Groups” with the support of the Union Parishads and government law enforcement agency. CPGs are acting as the mechanisms to respond to and report Child Protection Cases including child marriage. Like Children’s Organisations these groups act on stopping incidences of child marriage collectively.
- Awareness raising through Theatre For Development on productions focusing on child marriage performed in communities (usually by young people) and reaching many
- Awareness building workshops with Marriage Registrars, Religious leaders
- Children’s Organisations as well as children & girls’ forum meetings where children discuss issues on stopping child marriage and share news of any hints of a child marriage about to happen so they can take initiatives to intervene
- Signature Campaign, poster, leaflet, billboard as part of mass awareness building and creating motivation among people to act on stopping child marriage
- Child protection events organized at community level to protect children from child marriage
- Meeting and workshop to sensitize journalists for media coverage as part of mass awareness and sensitization



Activities on stopping child marriage: advocacy campaign; drama; mass gatherings

The Importance of Birth Registration

Plan Bangladesh places rigorous effort on achieving 100% Birth registration, an important programme component towards reducing child marriage. Plan’s objective is to strengthen the government mechanism by developing a functioning birth registration system. As part of its programme to stop child marriage, Plan is close to achieving 100% Online Birth registration in all of its working areas. To reach the objective, it has been working closely with the government to establish a functional *online* Birth Registration Information System (BRIS)⁹ so that birth dates cannot be tampered with to falsify the age of a girl at

⁹ Online system to record birth

marriage. Nilphamari, Dinajpur, Lalmonirhat and Gazipur Programme Units have achieved 100% online birth registration to date. In addition to this, child protection related training/workshops were organized with Police officers in Nilphamari, Dinajpur and Lalmonirhat District so that they understand the importance of treating child marriage as an offence and taking action to stop it.

Although only having birth registration card cannot stop child marriage¹⁰ as suggested by Plan's experience, it is a crucial component to reduce the incidence of child marriage in Plan intervention areas.

Progress in stopping child marriage

Plan Bangladesh has been working for almost for 6 years¹¹ on the issue of combating child marriage. A recent internal annual review of Plan's programmes show that Plan Bangladesh is moving towards reaching its target to increase the mean age of girls at the time of getting married from 15 to 18. At present the average mean age of girls' marriage is 17.05 years in Plan's working areas. There has been an increase in all areas apart from Gazipur, a peri-urban area (whereas all others are in northern rural Bangladesh) which has seen the mean age drop from 16 to 15.8.

The issues that contributed in the positive changes in the north are mass awareness building, working closely with duty bearers and the community people alongside strong advocacy.. Life skills trainings have also increased the negotiation skills of adolescents to say no to child marriage. They are taught how to communicate with parents and community members on the importance of delaying their marriage. In contrast, when analyzing the factors that hinder progress in Gazipur, it is apparent that being a peri-urban area people are on move most of the time, and it is not so easy to bring all stakeholders under one umbrella for collective action. In addition to this, the booming garments industry in the Gazipur area means that many young people (under 18) are working in factories, which gives them a certain level of liberty and opportunity to interact with the opposite sex which has led to an increase in self-initiated child marriages. This is an issue which Plan is exploring further and intends to undertake a study on.

Challenges faced

Plan recognizes that there are still challenges to be overcome in stopping child marriage. Poverty and societal perceptions are amongst the main causes of child marriage¹² which hinder overall achievements of the child marriage free union movement. Even though child marriage is strictly prohibited in the child marriage free union, there have been a number of cases whereby parents are taking their children outside of the area and secretly getting them married. Although births are being registered, falsified birth registration cards have been found in order to marry a girl off before she turns 18. This is where an online system of birth registration plays a very effective role. In its further development of the child marriage programme in Bangladesh, Plan is adding conditional cash transfers for girls from the poorest families to be able to continue at least 10 years of schooling; although there are stipends provided by the Bangladeshi government, these are not enough. Plan is also building its Youth Economic Development programme further so as to provide viable options for young women and their families to delay marriage and

¹⁰ Plan's internal Annual Participatory Progress Review 2012

¹¹ Average. In some areas Plan is working for 7 years, in some areas it is working for 5 years and so.

¹² ACMI research findings

Child Marriage Free Unions – Plan Bangladesh
Sanzida Parveen & Nirendra Nath Sarkar, March 2013

developing adolescents girls clubs at community level where out of girl schools and school going girls at risk of child marriage can be targeted to delay child marriage. Both education and economic opportunities have been clearly found as positive interventions to stop child marriage in research conducted by the International Centre of Research on Women (ICRW) on Plan Bangladesh's child marriage programming. Further learning will be generated on child marriage programming which will work towards developing the programme further so that activities can be replicable across the country.

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Appendix A:

Map of Child Marriage Free Unions

