

# Prevention of and Protection against Child Marriage in Bangladesh: Issues and Factors *vis-à-vis* Legal and Policy Framework

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the legal and policy framework in creating an enabling environment for prevention of child marriage. The paper asserts that an enabling legal and policy environment can contribute in turning child marriage practice into a less viable option for parents and girls. It illustrates that legal framework with respect to restraining child marriage in Bangladesh suffers from ambiguity. It neither allows nor disallows child marriage. Ambiguity and conflicting position on criminalizing and invalidating child marriage by the legal framework is the major obstacle in the enforcement of legislative instruments for restraining child marriage in Bangladesh. Contemporary social policies on issue of child marriage reflect lack of shared aims and vision in comprehending and approaching the problem. Few policies have explicitly brought the issue of child marriage as an impediment to social and economic development. However, in general there has been implicit recognition of the issue. The strategies set out in the social policies while focus on many of the risk and protective factors for child marriage they lack cohesiveness, connectedness and vigor. The issue has not been thematically mainstreamed into the entire social sector. Appropriate framework for elimination of child marriage requires greater synergy and harmonization between and among social policies and five year plans. Laws, policies, and programmes for elimination of child marriage should be woven around poverty, vulnerability, discrimination, abuse, violence, and dowry. Child marriage restraining programs needs to involve multiple sectors and follow multiple approaches.

**Keywords:** Child marriage; Risk factor, Protective factor, Legal framework, Policy framework

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## Introduction

Bangladesh has been identified as one of the 'hot spots' for child marriage in the world. Child marriage in Bangladesh remains one of the highest in the world and the highest in South Asia (Jain and Kurz, 2007; Nanda *et al.*, 2012; Myers, 2013; UNFPA, 2012). Child marriage remains higher in places that are in conflict situation and where level of development is relatively lower and poverty, birth and death rates are higher (UNFPA, 2005). Over the past three decades Bangladesh has made great strides on various fronts including education and health. However, child marriage has persisted here as a daunting social ill. Ending child marriage is crucial to protect child rights and achieve other social development goals.

Even though child marriage is widely prevalent in Bangladesh, it is not common across all the population groups. Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2011 reports median age at marriage increases with increase in household wealth (NIPORT *et al.*, 2013). Women from the highest wealth quintile marry two years later than women from the lowest wealth quintile. The age at marriage for other wealth quintiles varies little. However, there has been an increase in the median age of first marriage by one-and-half years from 14.9 for women in their mid to late forties to 16.6 years for those in their early twenties.

There is no denying fact that child marriage practice in this country has its roots in its social construction of 'girl child' that deem girls inferior and undermine their potential (Verma *et al.*, 2013). However, inadequate opportunities, poverty, and other forms of vulnerabilities intensify such social practice (Lewis, 2013; Myers, 2013). Therefore, it is important to ask why disadvantaged people choose child marriage as an option of life for their daughters as opposed to those who are socioeconomically better off. This will help us in analyzing legal and policy instruments for eliminating child marriage in the light of major factors associated with child marriage in the country.

This paper aims to know if legal provisions may or may not work for preventing child marriage, and if there has been an appropriate integration of child marriage issue within policy framework for preventing child marriage and mitigating its effects. This paper argues that an enabling legal and policy environment can contribute in turning child marriage practice into a less viable option for parents and girls through minimizing the prevalence of risk factors and maximizing the prevalence of protective factors.

In analyzing legal and policy framework to eliminate child marriage in Bangladesh, this paper seeks to address three questions: a) why do a large proportion of parents in Bangladesh choose child marriage as an option of life for their daughters? b) what legal and policy instruments are in place to restrain child marriage? and c) how far the legal and policy framework in Bangladesh have the possibility of creating an enabling environment for protecting girls against such practice?

## Methods

The study tried to address its research questions through analyzing a) the risk and protective factors for child marriage practice in Bangladesh, b) how social policies have integrated

child marriage issue, and c) possibility of the legal and policy frameworks to offset the influence of risk factors and enhance the influence of protective factors to deter child marriage practice in Bangladesh.

For examining and analyzing the legal and policy framework the study systematically reviewed all the relevant: a) international and national legal instruments for prevention of and protection against child marriage; and b) national policies of social sector having bearing on child marriage.

Risk and protective factors have been identified and analyzed through a review of studies on the issues and factors associated with child marriage and the determinants of age at first marriage in Bangladesh. Reviewed literatures were both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Literatures were searched through the use of database, PubMed and Google Scholar. Key words used for literature search were: child marriage in Bangladesh; determinants of child marriage in Bangladesh; issues of child marriage in Bangladesh; causes of child marriage in Bangladesh; factors affecting child marriage in Bangladesh. The study also used grey literatures on child marriage in Bangladesh. Websites of UNICEF, Plan International and Population Council, were searched for relevant publications. No date restrictions were used in literature search. The study adopted legalistic definition of child marriage and thus, any marriage where one of the spouses is below the age of 18 years is referred to as child marriage.

The study examined the contemporary national policy documents and the sixth five-year plan on issue of child marriage. Reflection of the policies and strategies on child marriage prevention programmes and interventions is beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Framework for analysis**

The study analyzed the legal and policy framework in creating an enabling environment for prevention of child marriage in the light of risk and protective factors for child marriage in Bangladesh. Risk and protective factors are widely used as a framework for analyzing adolescent behaviour including substance abuse, violence, and health behaviour, and therefore, for policy intervention to address these issues (Kalmus *et al.*, 2003; Blum and Mmari, 2004; Turbin *et al.*, 2006; Currie *et al.*, 2012). Risk factors are generally defined in terms of conditions, life events or experiences that are associated with undesirable behaviour or practice. Protective factors are the life events or experiences that on the one hand, mitigate the effects of risk factors and reduce the likelihood of problematic behaviour. Protective factors also increase resiliency, the ability to overcome the adverse conditions.

Thus, factors associated with child marriage are considered to be 'risk factors' if exposure to those makes people more prone to child marriage practice. Factors are considered 'protective' if exposure to those makes people less prone to child marriage practice or are associated with behaviours that discourage, restrict, and prevent child marriage. The greater the prevalence of risk factors, the greater the likelihood of prevalence of child marriage.

Risk factors are, therefore, referred in this study to conditions and features that make parents apprehensive about the social and economic penalties they may face for postponing their

daughters' marriage until their daughters attain the legal age for marriage. Presence and prominence of these features and conditions makes parents more likely to choose child marriage as an option for their daughters' life. Protective factors in this study are referred to the conditions that provide parents with incentives for postponing their daughters' marriage until they attain a certain age (at least legal age for marriage). Presence and prominence of these features and factors makes parents less likely to go for child marriage and in the long run offset the influence of risk factors.

The study sought whether there has been an appropriate linking of child marriage issue with social policy framework. Integration of the issue of child marriage with social policy framework requires pursuing elimination of child marriage as a means to development as well as a goal of development. In analyzing how social policies have integrated child marriage we have made distinction between child marriage as a social and development issue and child marriage as a rights issue. Acknowledging child marriage as a social and development issue requires linking child marriage issue with the challenges and goals of social policies. Therefore, from this perspective ending child marriage is pursued for achieving various social and development goals. Ending child marriage as a rights issue is pursued on its own right and child marriage is considered a violation of child rights causing a continuum of child rights violation. However, the legal and policy recognition of the issue does not necessarily ensure efficacy of the legal and policy environment to restrain child marriage practice until they are implemented through appropriate interventions.

### **Risk factors for child marriage practice in Bangladesh**

This section examines and analyses the risk factors that tend to intensify the practice of child marriage by posing threats of penalties in various forms for parents who do not marry off their daughters at an age considered appropriate by the community. Risk factors do not function in similar fashion across all population groups and do not equally influence marriage practice across all groups of population. These factors operate more strongly amidst the web of multiple disadvantages i.e., poverty, exclusion, vulnerabilities, lack of opportunities, etc. (UNICEF, 2001; Jain and Kurz, 2007). Higher prevalence of risk factors creates a vicious circle of child marriage, widening and deepening vulnerabilities, shrinking opportunities, dehumanizing of girls, and poverty and deprivation.

Child marriage practice in Bangladesh is an outcome of a complex interplay of factors like social and religious values, tradition, poverty, deprivation, outlaws against girls, etc. (Lewis, 2013; UNICEF, 2005; Geirbo and Imam, 2006). Social and religious values and tradition collectively influence standards and norms for marriage. However, standards and norms for marriage also differ among different population groups on the basis of exposure to the risk factors like poverty, deprivation, outlaws against girls, etc.

Child marriage is common in Bangladesh. Marriage for girls is near universal here. Marriage is perceived as the only means for women to gain social identity and status. Thus, failing to marry at all or at an age appropriate considered by the community ends in social stigmatization. Girls are commonly and traditionally considered to be of marriageable age

as soon as they attain puberty, signaling their reproductive ability (Aziz and Maloney, 1985; Geirbo and Imam, 2006). While traditionally child marriage is common here, there is also no restriction from religious laws in this regard. Muslim, Hindu, and Christian religious personal laws also permit girls' marriage before 18 years. Therefore, tradition, social values and religious laws together set conducive social setting for child marriage.

Child marriage is traditionally perceived here as a 'protection' for girls. It is perceived and practiced as one of the most important means to control female sexuality. Parents here, put most importance in preserving their daughters' chastity to protect their family honour in accordance with the religious and social value ascribed on girls' virginity (Aziz and Maloney, 1985; Lewis, 2013). Most parents view delay in marriage for girls after menarche as a risk factor for sexual exposure or sexual abuse (Aziz and Maloney, 1985; Geirbo and Imam, 2006). Girls who have been victim of sexual assault or violence run the risk of losing the chance of ever getting married (Geirbo and Imam, 2006). Even without being the victim of such violence, girls can earn labels of sexual debut. Spreading rumors about girls who are not married but are considered adult in the eyes of the community are common and such labeling often endangers girls' prospect of ever getting married (Amin and Huq, 2008).

Thus, child marriage is pursued by many parents as a strategy for 'protection' against the risk of sexual abuse and violence on girls. Such protection is sought from the fear of social sanctions against sexually violated or sexually active girls. However, child marriages frequently end up with very instable, short lived, and multiple marriages and violent marital life (Lewis, 2013; Amin *et al.*, 2012). Study on spousal physical violence reported that younger women are more likely to experience certain forms of abuse by husbands (Naved and Persson, 2005). Social pressures for marriage are so great that even an abusive marriage is preferred by parents than risking sexual abuse and violence outside marriage.

While social and religious values and tradition collectively influence in setting standards and norms for marriage, influence of social value is stronger over some standards and norms than religious values and tradition. Child marriage practice in Bangladesh is associated with certain social values and practices that are contrary to the religious proscriptions of the majority population in the country. Dowry (payments made by the bride's family to the grooms family) has turned into a common practice in Bangladesh particularly among poor and disadvantaged population irrespective of their religion (almost 90 percent of population being Muslim in the country has important social and economic bearings on introduction of such a practice). Islamic law provides different directive in marriage practice which requires groom to provide *mahar* or 'dower' in the form of property, payment or any other valuables to the bride. Provision of *mahar* or 'dower' as per Islamic law intends to give economic security to wife and limits husband's arbitrary use of unilateral divorce. However, instead of 'dower', practice of dowry now became a common feature of marriage practice in Bangladesh but had not been a tradition among Muslims (Hossain, 2003; Bates *et al.*, 2004; Amin and Huq, 2008).

Connection between dowry and child marriage is channeled through social perception about appropriate age of marriage for girls. Amount for dowry payments demanded by grooms'

family increases with increase in girls' age at marriage (Amin *et al.*, 1998; Bates *et al.*, 2004). Research shows a strong association between age at marriage and amounts of dowry paid in Bangladesh (Bates *et al.*, 2004; Amin and Bajracharya, 2011). In a society where marriage for girls is highly valued, refusal of marriage prospect for dowry demand is not perceived as a viable option by many parents (Bates *et al.*, 2004; Geirbo and Imam, 2006; Amin and Bajracharya, 2011). Dowry is also considered by parents as an insurance against maltreatment of girls at marital home (Bates *et al.*, 2004; Geirbo and Imam, 2006). Violence on girls and women in Bangladesh are also associated with dowry practice in marriage (Bates *et al.*, 2004; Naved and Persson 2005; Naved and Persson, 2010; Amin and Bajracharya, 2011). Ironically, even dowry payment does not ensure violence and abuse free life for girls. Bates *et al.* (2004) reported that women's vulnerability to maltreatment rather increases if dowry payment is considered meager by the grooms' family. Similarly, Suran *et al.* (2004) reported that among those who paid dowry, only those who paid the largest amount possess a lower risk of violence and abuse. More importantly, those who did not pay any dowry are found to possess an overall lower risk (Suran *et al.*, 2004; Naved and Persson, 2010).

High value placed on marriage for girls and girls' chastity, risk to the exposure of sexual violence, and dowry practice each of these works in connection with another. For instance, while looks of bride is a very desirable attribute in marriage for getting prospective brides, it is also associated with increased risk for higher dowry if girls' good looks elevate the risk of bad reputation (Suran *et al.*, 2004).

Thus, traditions, social, and religious values together set a normative standard for marriage practice including age for marriage in general. However, these traditions, and social and religious values are changing and are being replaced by new values, standards, and norms. People with better socioeconomic opportunities have the option to adopt different strategy and pursue different marriage strategies. Marriage strategies adopted by parents of educated girls and less or uneducated girls differ significantly. Education opens up a range of marriage strategy including self-initiated marriages without requiring any dowry payment (Suran *et al.*, 2004).

While discrimination of girls against boys is a general feature of this society like many others, this discrimination turns ruthless amidst poverty. Poor parents consider girl child as an economic burden on them (Myers, 2013). Parents prioritize boys over girls in terms of household resource allocation for food, health, and education where there is competing demand for resources allocation among siblings. Poor parents see marriage for daughters as a means of getting relief from economic stress because upon marriage husbands are supposed to be the providers (Aziz and Maloney, 1985; Lewis, 2013).

All the risk factors for child marriage operate strongly within multifaceted poverty and deprivation. Girls in rural areas are at the most risk of child marriage with 70 percent of girls getting married before they reach 18 years of age (UNFPA, 2012; Nanda *et al.*, 2012; Lewis, 2013). Forces of the risk factors are channeled through multiple deprivations to promote and sustain child marriages. Such as, while risk for sexual abuse and violence prevails for all

groups of girls, such risks are much higher for poorer section because of their residence, weaker social connections, etc. On the other hand, stronger social and economic position of parents by default creates some protection against such outlaws in terms of secured habitat, stronger connections, etc. Thus, risk of sexual abuse and violence driven child marriages are also most common among them. Similarly, research shows the practice of dowry disproportionately affects the disadvantaged (Bates *et al.*, 2004). Non-payment of dowry is found to be associated with higher income levels and geographic location. While poorer people pay a higher proportion of dowry, they pay smaller amounts. Smaller amount of dowry payment rather increases girls' vulnerability in their marital life (Suran *et al.*, 2004).

### **Protective factors those restrain child marriage**

The intrinsic virtues of the protective factors tend to offset the influence of risk factors. Effective functioning of protective factors against child marriage is contingent on lesser prevalence and prominence of the risk factors.

Studies on the determinants of child marriage have universally found that girls' schooling affects child marriage practice. Education and age at first marriage are found to be strongly associated both at the individual and societal level across the countries (UNICEF, 2005). Women attending secondary school across the countries are less likely to get married at younger age than those with lesser education. Countries with a higher proportion of women with a secondary education have a lower proportion of women who marry as adolescents (Sing and Samara, 1996). Likewise, BDHS 2011 has also shown that women who have completed secondary or higher education marry 5 years later than those with no education (NIPORT *et al.*, 2013). This is consistent with the findings of other studies in Bangladesh (Kamal, 2012; Kabeer, 2011; Haque *et al.*, 2014).

Education operates directly through improving women's status and indirectly through increasing their income potential. Thus, education is often perceived as a means of improving marriageability and increasing affordability for marriage by working as a substitute for dowry (Bates *et al.*, 2004). Education also gives protection against violence. Bates *et al.* (2004) showed that odds of violence had significantly reduced for women with more than 5 years of education compared to women with no education. Naved and Persson (2005) showed that husband's education beyond the tenth grade had a protective effect on violence.

However, the quality of schooling is more important than years of schooling for contributing in delaying marriage and childbirth. Quality schooling provides better chance for delaying marriage through providing girls with better social network, opportunities, and raising their self-esteem and expectation of their own life (Schurmann, 2009).

Working or income earning opportunities before marriage as a determinant for age at first marriage in Bangladesh has not been adequately studied to form an evidence for it to be called as a protective factor against child marriage. Non-availability of data for this indicator in the national level surveys in Bangladesh has been a major reason for it not being studied as a predictor for prevalence of child marriage. Therefore, evidence for income earning

opportunities before marriage as a determinant for age at first marriage for Bangladesh is lacking. However, while such evidence is lacking for child marriage, work with regular and independent income earning opportunities for women on the whole acts for women's overall empowerment in many ways (Kabeer *et al.*, 2011). A study on young female garment workers in Bangladesh showed that young female garment workers married significantly later than girls who did not work (Amin *et al.*, 1998).

### **Legal and policy framework to redress child marriage**

Child marriage prevention programmes and strategies of the national and international agencies working in the prevalent countries focuses on the followings: a) empowering girls with information, skills, and support networks or social assets; b) educating and mobilizing parents and community members to transform detrimental social norms; c) enhancing the accessibility and quality of formal schooling for girls; d) enhancing economic support and incentives for girls and their families; e) fostering an enabling legal and policy framework (Malhotra *et al.*, 2011; UNFPA, 2012).

First three areas of focus of child marriage prevention strategies and programmes at the international level are the product of the fourth one, i.e. an enabling legal and policy framework. Therefore, fostering an enabling legal and policy framework is the key in ending child marriage practice, which requires: a) provision of legal and policy instruments taking into account the risk and protective factors for child marriage; and b) appropriate enforcement of the legal and policy instruments.

Last two sections have set the context within which legal and policy framework is required to operate for creating an environment that is conducive for ending child marriage practice. Thus, it needs to operate at two fronts to address systemic failures to prevent child marriage: a) to minimize the prevalence and prominence of the risk factors, and b) to promote the prevalence and prominence of the protective factors. Following two sections will describe and analyze the legal and policy framework from this perspective.

### **International and national legal obligations relating to child marriage**

This section focuses on Bangladesh's international and national legal obligations relating to child marriage. The first sub-section presents the international and regional human rights instruments applicable to child marriage and highlights Bangladesh's relevant reservations to these instruments. The second sub-section discusses Bangladesh's national laws relating to child marriage.

#### ***International laws on marriage, age of marriage, consent of marriage, and registration of marriage :***

International concern on the issue of marriage, age of marriage, consent of marriage and registration of marriage is essentially a post United Nations (UN) development. One of the features of the UN Charter which distinguishes it from the Covenant of the League of Nations is its concern for human rights in general and rights of women in particular. There



are seven specific references in the Charter of human rights but nowhere does it catalogue or define them. Nevertheless, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (UDHR) and the subsequent treaties adopted by the UN and other regional organizations have laid down the standards.

### ***International law on consent of marriage***

The UDHR, without making any reference to age or registration of marriage clearly spells out that marriage shall not take place without free and full consent of the intending partners [article 16(2)]. Similar provisions have been restated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966 [article 10(1)] and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 [article 23(3)]. At the regional level, even though the European Convention on Human Rights 1950 and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights 1981 is silent on the issue of consent of marriage, the American Convention on Human Rights, 1969 [article 17(3)] echoes the UDHR and the two covenants. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990, while talks about minimum age of marriage and registration of marriage, it is silent about the consent of marriage. On the other hand, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Woman in Africa 2003 clearly spells out that no marriage shall take place without the free and full consent of both parties [article 6(b)].

The UN General Assembly by resolution 843 (IX) of 17 December 1954 declared that certain customs, ancient laws, and practice relating to marriage and family were inconsistent with the principles set forth in the Charter of the UN and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such declaration was followed by adoption of the Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriage 1962 by the UN Article 1(1) of the convention clearly spelled out that no marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties, such consent to be expressed by them in person after due publicity and in the presence of the competent authority competent to solemnize the marriage and of the witness, as prescribed by law.

The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery 1956 emphasizes about facilities whereby the consent of both parties to a marriage may be freely expressed in the presence of a competent civil or religious authority (article 2) while the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979 calls upon states parties to ensure that couples enter into marriage only with their free and full consent [article 16(2)].

### ***International law on age of marriage***

The international concern on the age of marriage i.e., the UN begins with mere reference to 'full age' as opposed to suggesting a specific age for marriage as article 16(1) envisages "man and women of full age . . . shall have the right to marry and to found a family." The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery 1956 merely invites state parties "to prescribe, where appropriate, suitable minimum ages of marriage" (article 2). The same expression i.e.,

'minimum age of marriage' are found in the Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriage 1962 (article 2) and the CEDAW 1979 [16(2)] albeit without making any reference to the expression 'suitable'. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 without suggesting any specific age of marriage guarantees the right of men and women of marriageable age to marry and found a family [article 23(2)].

The first international effort directly suggesting the minimum age of marriage appears to be the Recommendation on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages 1956 (General Assembly Resolution 2018 (XX) of 1 November 1956) which is a non-binding instrument. Principle II of the same reads as follows: "Member states shall take legislative action to specify a minimum age of marriage, which in any case shall not be less than 15 years of age; no marriage shall be legally entered into by any person under this age, except where a competent authority has granted a dispensation as to age, for reasons, in the interest of the intending spouses." It is however, interesting to note that the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages 1962, and CEDAW 1979 leaves the determination of age of marriage by the state parties and requires legislative action to specify a minimum age of marriage [article 2 and article 16(2) respectively].

### *International law on registration of marriage*

In international law, the registration of marriages was first introduced in the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery 1956. As opposed to compulsory registration, under this convention the state parties only assumed obligation to encourage registration of marriages (article 2). The Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriage 1962 was the first document to suggest compulsory registration of marriages in the following manner: "all marriages shall be registered in an appropriate official register by the competent authority." This was subsequently echoed in article 16(2) of CEDAW 1979 and article 21 (2) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Child 1990.

### *Ratification/accession and reservation of certain provisions of the conventions by Bangladesh*

Bangladesh has ratified the major international human rights instruments relevant to the issue of child marriage, yet has also made reservations and declarations to some of these instruments that seek to limit its obligations under those instruments. On 5 October 1998, Bangladesh acceded to the Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriage with reservations to Articles 1 and 2 in the following terms: "the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh reserves the right to apply the provisions Articles 1 and 2 in so far as they relate to the question of legal validity of child marriage, in accordance with the personal laws of different religious communities of the country. At the time of acceding to CEDAW 1979 on 6 November 1984, the government of

Bangladesh entered reservations to Article 2 regarding the elimination of discrimination against women and to Article 16 (1) (c) regarding equality of rights in marriage and upon its dissolution “as they conflict with *Sharia* law based on Holy Quran and Sunna.”

Consequently, women’s groups started advocacy at the national level and thereafter, a CEDAW Forum was formed and launched in 1992, composed of individuals and organizations dedicated to the women’s cause and the implementation of CEDAW. Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), *Mahila Parishad*, and *Nari Pokkho* had front-lined the said Forum. With the help of the International Women’s Rights Action Watch (IWRAP), workshops, training, and CEDAW forums were organized for different groups including lawyers, journalists and citizens. The main aim of these workshops and forums were to raise public awareness on how to incorporate the convention with emphasis on Articles 2, 13.1 [a], 16.1[c] and [f] into the domestic laws.

Such advocacy for the withdrawal of Bangladesh’s reservations compelled the government to call on several women’s groups to discuss their opinions about the country’s CEDAW Report which was due in 1997. This ultimately led the government of Bangladesh to withdraw its reservation on the 23 July 1997, on article 16 (1) (c) dealing with marriage issue.

#### ***National laws on marriage, age of marriage, consent of marriage, and registration of marriage***

The national law of Bangladesh on the above issue predates international development as the first law on the subject was enacted in 1929 to restrain solemnization of child marriages. Under the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, minimum age of marriage was set at 14 years for females and 18 years for males (Section 2).

National law predating the international development as well as the minimum age of girls for marriage setting at 14 years by law reflects that marrying off girls at a very young age was the age old custom here which the law sought to contest in restraining child marriage. The minimum age of marriage was subsequently raised to 16 and then to 18 for female and 21 for male in 1984. The age of consent of marriage is linked to the minimum age of marriage. One can lawfully consent to marriage when the law allows him/her to marry.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 applies to all religions. There are three separate offences under this Act: a) marriage by an adult to a child; b) solemnization of a marriage involving a child; and c) promoting or permitting the solemnization of a marriage involving a child. However, this Act does not invalidate child marriage. The involved persons in the said three categories of offences are liable to imprisonment or fine or both. According to section 4, whoever being a male below 21 years of age, or being a female below 18 years of age, contracts a child marriage shall be punishable with simple imprisonment (one month) and/or monetary penalty (one thousand taka).

Registration of marriage has an important bearing on restraining child marriage. Marriage registration is the formal recording of essential details of a marriage including age of bride and bridegroom and the date of marriage at an official register. A copy of such entry in the

register is the evidence of marriage. The Muslim Marriage and Divorce (Registration) Act 1974 requires every Muslim marriage to be registered. The Hindu Family Law Rules contain no provision for registration of marriage. Buddhist marriage also takes place without registration. The Christian Marriage Act 1872 requires compulsory registration of every Christian marriage.

The Birth and Death Registration Act 2004 assists in determining the age, which is crucial for restraining child marriage. Before this enactment, birth, death, and marriage registration used to be dealt by the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1873 and the Births, Deaths, and Marriages Registration Act 1886. Birth and Death Registration Act 2004 requires birth certificates as proof of age to be accompanied for obtaining many services including marriage registration. Therefore, strict implementation of birth registration and marriage registration are important instruments for restraining child marriage. Besides providing with protection against child marriage, birth registration is an important instrument for children to be protected against all forms of child abuses including child labour, child trafficking, sexual abuses, and to be entitled to different services like health and education.

#### ***National law prohibiting dowry in Bangladesh***

Recognizing dowry as a major social problem, the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980 has come into force. According to section 3 of the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980, if any person gives or takes or abets the giving or taking of dowry, he or she shall be punishable with imprisonment which may extend to five years and shall not be less than one year, or with fine, or with both.

On the other hand, according to section 4 if any person demands, directly or indirectly, from the parents or guardian of a bride or bridegroom, as the case may be, any dowry, he shall be punishable with imprisonment, which may extend to five years and shall not be less than one year, or with fine, or with both.

#### ***Issues in fostering an enabling legal environment in Bangladesh***

In Bangladesh, marriage laws are based on a combination of religious and statutory laws. As stated earlier, statutory laws dictate that the age of consent and minimum age for marriage is 18 years for women and 21 years for men. However, legally, the consent of both parties to a marriage is required. Consent to marry becomes one of the primary factors in determining the validity of a marriage only if parties to a marriage are above the legal age of consent. A forced marriage may, therefore, be challenged and declared invalid if there is evidence to indicate that either party did not consent to the union. Where the parties are minors, consent to the marriage may be given by their legal guardians. On the contrary, marrying off minors is a criminal offence, and persons who marry off minors may be prosecuted under the Child Marriage Restraint Act. However, the marriage itself would not be invalidated by this process. Thus, legal bar on age at marriage applies only to marriages taking place without parental consent and does not apply to marriages arranged by parents for children below the legal minimum age.

Thus, statutory law does not invalidate child marriage solemnized by parents, but it intends to limit, restrict, and regulate child marriage practice. All religious personal laws i.e., Muslim, Hindu, and Christian allow marriage below the minimum legal age for marriage set by the statutory laws. Therefore, religious laws allow child marriage and the statutory laws neither allow nor disallow child marriage. Further, penalties for child marriage under statutory law are too weak to establish it as a serious offence and deter people from committing such offences. Moreover, there is no scope for bringing criminal prosecution after one year of the solemnization of marriage (Section 9 of the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929). Such provision creates a culture of impunity thereby making child marriages all pervasive.

Determination of age at marriage is complicated because registration of births has never been commonly practiced in Bangladesh. This greatly limits the possibility for legal remedy. The lack of birth registration makes falsification of the ages of couples easy (Lewis, 2013; Geirbo and Imam, 2006). However, there has been an improvement in this situation after enactment of Birth and Death Registration Act in 2004. Initiative for development of an online Birth Registration Information System is also in place. Despite lack of enforcement, marriage registration has increased (Bates *et al.*, 2004; Amin *et al.*, 2012). Studies show that marriage registration is perceived by women and their guardians as an important mechanism for ensuring marital security and resorting to legal justice against maltreatments and abandonment (Bates *et al.*, 2004).

Addressing the issue of dowry by prohibition law remains bleak. Enforcement of this law is limited because desperate need for marrying off daughters at an age considered appropriate by the society compels parents to accept dowry demand. Seeking legal justice for dowry demand at the cost of jeopardizing the marriage prospect of daughters is not a feasible option for parents in a social setting where marriage for girls is highly valued and scope for empowering girls is limited.

### **Policy framework to redress child marriage practice**

International strategies and programmes ending child marriage focuses on the following aspects of policy initiation and reforms towards an enabling policy environment (Hervish and Feldman-Jacobs, 2011): a) framing policies and programmes on the basis of risk factors; b) inclusion of multiple sectors in interventions; c) using behaviour change techniques to change community norms; d) addressing the needs of young adolescent girls; and e) collecting and providing evidence about “what works”.

Following section reviews major social sector policies having relevance with elimination of child marriage in the light of risk and protective factors of child marriage as has been focused by the international strategies and programmes for ending child marriage. The Sixth Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) (GoB, 2011a); the Seventh Five-Year plan (2016-2020) (GoB, 2015); the National Health Policy 2011 (GoB, 2011b), The National Education Policy 2010 (GoB, 2010), the National Population Policy 2012 (GoB, 2012), the National Policy for Women’s Advancement 2011 (GoB, 2011c), the National Children Policy 2011 (GoB

2011d), the National Communication Strategy for Family Planning and Reproductive Health 2008 (GoB, 2008), and have been analyzed to examine if these policies have adequately linked issue of child marriage in framing their challenges, in setting their goals, and in constituting their strategies. Strategies set out in the policy documents have been reviewed in the light of the risk and protective factors for child marriage. MDGs were directly related to all the social sector policies. Therefore, all these policy goals were related to and relevant for achievement of MDGs. Elimination of child marriage was critical for achieving all the MDGs. Therefore, mainstreaming the issue of child marriage into social sector was crucial for both elimination of child marriage as well as achievement of social policy or sectoral goals including MDGs. Child marriage is one of the most crucial child rights issues of the country and is the source of violation of other child rights. Policies to address child marriage must evolve around its risks factors like, poverty, lower value of girls, dowry, sexual violence, etc. Policies and strategies for restraining child marriage must include married children to support them out of the trap of vicious circle of diminishing opportunities, increasing vulnerabilities, ill health, and poverty. Therefore, policy position on married children has also been reviewed.

### ***Contemporary social policies to redress child marriage***

National law for restraining child marriage which predated international concern shows that Bangladesh has traditionally been featured with marriage at very low age and national concern on this issue is also not new. Focus on adolescents in the policy framework is a recent phenomenon but restraining child marriage is not. However, while policy concern for child marriage is not new, the framing of the problem had many lacking. Initially at the policy level issue of early marriage had been an element of focus mainly within the realm of population sector of the country. Thus, its relevance had been brought mainly in connection with the demographic issues of the country and was located within the population sector. It has already been mentioned in the preceding section that the Child Marriage Restraints Act 1929 had set the minimum legal age for marriage at 14 for girls and 18 for boys. The minimum age for marriage set by the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 has been recognized very low at the policy level. Thus, the main concern of the initial plans and policy documents (five-year plan documents and population policy 1976) of the country on child marriage was on raising the legal age for marriage. Persistent claim on raising legal age for marriage at the policy level has ultimately succeeded in revising it, and therefore, raising the minimum legal age for marriage. Success in raising legal age for marriage has moved the country one step forward in dealing with child marriage. It has created the platform to work for taking further measures to delay marriage for girls at least until 18 years.

Education and health sectors have profound effect on positive social transformation and development. Education sector can directly work in restraining child marriage through bringing attitudinal change and empowering children for restraining child marriage. Health sector's role in mitigating the effects of child marriage is more pronounced than in bringing attitudinal changes for restraining child marriage. However, despite having distinctive roles of the two sectors, health sector can also contribute in brining attitudinal change by extensive

health education against child marriage and child bearing by children. Similarly, education sector can mitigate the effects of child marriage by focusing on married children through inclusion strategies. These two sectors could be considered as the vanguard for positive social transformation and development. In order for these sectors to play a transformative role it is crucial to appropriately link issues like child marriage with their sector challenges, goals, and strategies.

The National Education Policy 2010 (GoB, 2010) has duly emphasized on women's education for their overall empowerment without explicitly linking it to the issue of child marriage. The policy has argued for special attention and allocation of resources for women's education including stipends for poor and meritorious girls to enable them to pursue higher education. The policy has not explicitly mentioned child marriage as a prime challenge for attaining education sector's goals including MDGs. However, the policy's overall emphasis on women's education and special protection of poorer girls for enabling them to pursue education, minimizing dropouts of girl students are all linked with child marriage. For ensuring girls' safety at the educational institutions it has emphasized on strict enforcement of law for sexual harassment. The policy has also recognized the need for updating the curriculum to play its transformative role through educating students on gender, reproductive health, etc. Thus, while education policy has duly emphasized girls' education it has not explicitly recognized child marriage as a prime development, social or rights issue in connection with the challenges and goals of education sector.

The Sixth Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) (GoB, 2011a) in its Strategic Directions and Policy Framework (Part I) has integrated the issue of child marriage in constructing its challenges and strategies for human development more rationally and pronouncedly. Its Human Resources Development Strategy Section is comprised of education and health sector. The Human Resources Development Strategy for education sector had recognized high prevalence of child marriage, dowry, gender-based violence, persisting low wage for women and the continuing low value placed on girls and women as the most important challenges for human development. It had linked the access, drop out, and equity issues in the secondary education level with discrimination of girl child, child marriage, perceived insecurity, and sexual harassment of girls. Consequently, education strategies framed by the plan included provision of stipend and other financial support to the poor and especially to the female students to encourage their enrolment, retention, and completion. Thus, child marriage was addressed by the education sector of the plan as a prime social and development issue in connection with its risk factors. However, the plan's human resources development strategy relating to health sector did not integrate child marriage issue in framing its challenges and strategies as a whole. The issue of child marriage was integrated in its health and population sector only with respect to its impact on delaying age at first birth and thereby fertility reduction for better population management of the country. This narrow perspective of dealing with child marriage by the policy framework is certainly flawed. The plan's Sectoral Strategies, Programmes and Policies (Part II) was also reflective of its Human Resources Development Strategy with regard to integration of child marriage issue with health and population sector strategy.

The Seventh Five Year Plan (2016-2020) (GoB, 2015) has followed the same course with regard to integrating the issue of child marriage in its sector development strategy. The plan's Strategic Directions and Policy Framework (Part I) does not have Human Resources Development Strategy comprising of education and health sector strategy like the Sixth Five Year Plan. The plan's education, health and population sector strategies are outlined under its Sector Development Strategy (Part II). Its Sector Development Strategy has integrated the issue of child marriage in framing the challenges and strategies for education sector only. Its Health and Population sector brought the issue of child marriage only in connection with its impact on reduction of fertility as the Sixth Five Year Plan's Health and Population Sector Strategy did.

Nevertheless, married children are neither focused by the education policy nor by the sixth and seventh five-year plans. While denial of education as a child right and consequence of child marriage are widely recognized, the education of married children as a right or as a social and development issue has not been a policy concern. Thus, there has not been a strategic focus either by the education policy or by the sixth and seventh five-year plan on married children.

The National Health Policy 2011 (GoB, 2011b) has not linked child marriage in constructing its challenges for achieving its health goals in general and MDGs in particular. Thus, despite putting major attention on improvement of maternal and child health in line with MDGs, the policy has not integrated child marriage in framing its strategies to address maternal and child health challenges. In other words, the issue of child marriage has not been appropriately mainstreamed with maternal and child health strategies. Social awareness, advocacy, education, and mobilization on child marriage, violence, and dowry are very important but missing components in the national health policy. Thus, health sector's role in restraining child marriage has not been tapped by the policy. However, maternal and child health strategies intrinsically include married children and children of child parents. Issue of child marriage is incorporated within the health policy to the extent its maternal and child health strategies are intrinsically linked to provisioning of health services for married children and children of child parents. Thus, health sector's role in mitigating the effects of child marriage has only been partially tapped.

The issue of child marriage has constituted a major concern in the population sector in connection with its recent focus on adolescents' health and well-being. In the National Population Policy 2012 (GoB, 2012) the issue of child marriage has been brought in connection with adolescents' welfare programmes. Delaying marriage and childbirth, reproductive health education for adolescents, vocational training, credit facilities; and working opportunities for unmarried adolescents constitute the strategies for ensuring adolescents' welfare. The population policy has identified child marriage as a major demographic challenge of the country. Accordingly, strict enforcement of birth and marriage registration has been recognized as one of the most effective means to restrain child marriages. Therefore, the policy in setting its strategy highlighted the important role of relevant ministries for enforcement of registration of birth, death, marriage, and divorce. The population policy did not explicitly focus on the need of the married children. However,



issue of married children is incorporated within the population policy to the extent its reproductive health strategies including family planning and maternal and child health strategies are intrinsically linked to provisioning of health services for married children and children of child parents. Thus, the policy has primarily dealt the issue of child marriage as a demographic challenge. Child marriage as a health and development issue got prominence in connection with adolescents' development. However, child marriage has not been dealt as a rights issue by the policy even in connection with adolescents.

The National Communication Strategy for Family Planning and Reproductive Health 2008 (GoB, 2008) has included enhancing awareness about the importance of delaying marriage and first pregnancy and preventing sexually transmitted diseases. For unmarried youths the strategy has recommended culturally sensitive communication materials about healthy perceptions of the opposite sex, negative impacts of dowry exchange, domestic violence, and women's rights. For adolescents, the strategy has recommended for adolescent life-skills programmes into school curriculum and creating an enabling environment for adolescents to seek information and services at local health facilities. Thus, the strategy has integrated child marriage as a health issue in connection with gender issues. However, child marriage as child rights issue has not been dealt by the policy.

The National Policy for Children, 2011 (GoB, 2011d) encompassed wide ranging areas relating to children's multidimensional growth and advancement and their protection from various types of abuse and violations. The policy has given special attention to disabled and autistic children. The policy has focused on child marriage issue in connection with protection of adolescents. It has particularly mentioned protection of adolescents from violence, marriage, trafficking and forcing into commercial sex. However, the policy's sections on children's education, health and development of the girl children did not integrate the child marriage issue despite it being very pertinent for all three sections.

The National Policy for Women's Advancement 2011 (GoB, 2011c) has framed child marriage as a rights issue having its roots in various forms of vulnerabilities and deprivations of girls. It has set explicit goal for restraining child marriage, sexual abuse, and other forms of violations on girls through strict enforcement of law. Its main strategic focus for eliminating discriminatory practices against girls are: a) empowerment of girls and women through education, training, skill development programmes, and creating income earning opportunities; b) gender sensitization through education, training, and mass awareness programmes at all levels; and c) enforcement of laws against violation and repression of women.

However, National Policy for Women's Advancement (GoB, 2011c) cannot work in isolation in dealing with any social aspects affecting women's life and well-being. Women's Advancement Policy should be mainstreamed into all other relevant sector policies and programmes. Women's Advancement Policy focus on empowerment, gender sensitization, skill development training, credit facilities, etc. cannot be dealt only by the ministry of women and children affairs and the ministry of social welfare. These strategies need to be mainstreamed into other sectors to work in an integrated way towards elimination of harmful social practices like child marriage, dowry, violence, etc.

Sixth Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) (GoB, 2011a) duly emphasized on social inclusion and empowerment of women and children. The plan reiterated Policy for Women's Advancement on issue of women's empowerment for addressing multifarious discrimination. Creating multifaceted opportunities for women has been considered as the most important means to fight against discrimination and outlaws on women. It has recognized violence, dowry, child marriage, social attitude as major challenges in the way to women's advancement. Similarly, children's protection and empowerment in addition to their education, health, and nutrition has been outlined as important way to promoting children's advancement and protecting child rights. Social mobilization for birth registration involving Municipal Corporations and *Pourashabhas*, *Union Parishad* members, and other local leaders on issues of children's advancement and rights has been explicitly mentioned in the plan. Therefore, the plan has acknowledged child marriage as a rights issue by recognizing child marriage and its risk factors (violence, dowry, social attitude, etc.) as impediments for women's empowerment and advancement.

Sixth Five-Year Plan's (2011-2015) (GoB, 2011a) approach towards integrating the issue of child marriage in its strategic framework was more organized than the social policies and the subsequent five year plan. Such lack of cohesion among policies, plans and strategies shows an overall inadequacy in comprehensiveness and connectedness on issue of child marriage.

### ***Issues in fostering an enabling policy environment for restraining child marriage in Bangladesh***

Review of the major social policies depicts that child marriage despite being one of the most daunting social and development challenges and child rights issue of the country, it has not been adequately and explicitly framed as a social, development, and rights issue within the social policy framework. Thus, it has not been appropriately mainstreamed into the social sector policies. Few policies have explicitly recognized it as a social or development challenge or rights issue. However, the policies in general gave implicit recognition of the issue in one way or another. The policies in general also include components in their strategies those are related to, relevant for, or have implications on the risk and protective factors for child marriage. Thus, one may claim that issue of child marriage has been integrated with social policies. However, integrating an issue within a framework calls for much more than just implicit and sporadic mention of the issue or occasional inclusion within the strategies. It demands appropriate framing of the issue and an application of a systematic and well-knitted approach involving multiple sectors, strategies, and approaches.

Child marriage having its multiple roots and being a cross cutting issue cannot be dealt with one or two sectors' intervention. Issue of child marriage has been an explicit focus of population policy and women's policy only. Other social policies on issue of child marriage reflect lack of coherence and connection in comprehending and approaching the problem. The policies have largely failed to link their sector goals and strategies with elimination of child marriage. It has not been dealt as a cross cutting issue in the social sector. However,

the sixth five-year plan has incorporated the issues of child marriage within its human development framework much more comprehensively than the national education and health policy.

Social mobilization through advocacy, awareness building despite being one of the most effective routes for dealing with issues like child marriage, dowry, violence, etc. remained much neglected as a strategy in the social policies. Health policy in particular has not paid due attention in these areas for achieving its role in restraining child marriage.

Policies have not recognized the issue of supporting or protecting children who are already married. Thus, the subject of mitigating the effects of child marriage remained neglected at large. On the one hand, failure of legal and policy framework in giving due protection to a very large percent of young girls ends in child marriage. On the other hand, policies turn a blind eye to the need of supporting those who are already trapped into it.

### **Conclusion**

The perceived notion on primacy of marriage in girls' life, appropriate age of marriage for girls, chastity of girls, 'marriage as a protection' for girls from premarital sexual exposure and sexual violence or abuse, and dowry in marriage practice, poverty, and other forms of deprivations are the major risk factors for child marriage in Bangladesh. Education is the single most predictive factor for protection against child marriage practice. Higher prevalence of multifarious risk factors makes child marriage a feasible option for many poor parents in Bangladesh. Child marriage turns into a realistic response for many girls and parents in the context of multifaceted vulnerabilities in their life. In addition, customs or tradition as derivative of socio-cultural values centering marriage takes precedence over legal and sometimes even over religious directives.

Child Marriage Restrain Act of the country predates international legal commitment on this issue. Policy concern on child marriage is also not new. However, earlier policy focus concerning child marriage issue was narrow. In addition to Child Marriage Restrain Act, few more legislations have been made to restrain child marriage through protecting girls against the risk factors. However, such legislation and policy concerns could hardly restrain the harmful practice and protect girls from child marriage.

Legal provisions in Bangladesh do not invalidate child marriage. All religious personal laws i.e., Muslim, Hindu, and Christian, allow marriage below the minimum legal age for marriage set by the statutory laws. Statutory laws while intend to restrict child marriage, these preserve the legal validity of child marriage arranged by parents. Legal bar on age at marriage applies only to marriages where parental consent is absent. It does not apply to marriages arranged by parents for children below the minimum legal age. For the minors, consent to marriages may be given by their legal guardians. Contrarily, marrying off minors is a criminal offence, and persons who marry off minors may be prosecuted under the Child Marriage Restraint Act. However, such marriages will not be invalidated by this process. Thus, statutory law neither allows nor disallows child marriage. Therefore, legal framework with respect to restraining child marriage suffers from ambiguity and loses its strength.

Such ambiguity and conflicting position on criminalizing and invalidating child marriage by the legal framework is the major obstacle in the enforcement of legislative instruments for restraining child marriage in Bangladesh. Hence, legal protection against child marriage in Bangladesh turns into a paradox.

Recognizing dowry as a major social problem and a risk factor for child marriage the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980 came into force. Enforcement of this law is limited by the fact that refusal of marriage prospect for dowry demand is not perceived as a viable option for parents. Desperate need for marrying off their daughters at an age considered appropriate by the society compels parents to accept such practices. Seeking legal protection for dowry demand ends marriage prospect. Negating marriage prospect is not considered viable by parents because marriage for girls remains the most valued option for gaining status, power, and inclusion within the mainstream. Therefore, dowry as a major risk factor for child marriage remains inadequately served by the legislation.

Enforcement of birth and marriage registration system is crucial in restraining child marriage. Registration of births has not been a common practice and a systemic requirement of the country. Therefore, determining age at first marriage remains difficult in general. However, recently there has been an improvement in birth and marriage registration.

Legislation is very important but cannot be effective without a comprehensive policy framework for restraining child marriage. Moreover, in a situation where child marriages are not invalidated by the laws and enforcement of laws for aiding the determination of age at marriage also remains weak, the role of social policy is of paramount importance in preventing child marriage. Role of social policies in transforming mindset of the society is crucial. This does not implicate legal reforms for removing ambiguity about child marriage is of lesser importance and should not be pursued.

Review of the national social policies depicts that child marriage has not been appropriately framed as a social, development and rights issue for the country. On the whole, child marriage issue has not been aptly integrated with the framework for social development. Contemporary social policies on issue of child marriage reflect lack of shared aims and vision in comprehending and approaching the problem. Few policies have explicitly brought the issue of child marriage as an impediment to social and economic development and even fewer have considered it as rights issue. However, in general there has been implicit recognition of the issue. The strategies set out in the social policies while focus on many of the risk and protective factors for child marriage they lack cohesiveness, connectedness, and vigor. The issue has not been thematically mainstreamed into the entire social sector. National social policies have largely failed to frame child marriage as a cross cutting issue and link their respective MDGs with this issue. Hence, there has not been an appropriate linking of the sector goals and strategies with elimination of child marriage.

Furthermore, despite widespread recognition of multifaceted consequences of child marriage the policies are silent on mitigating the effects of child marriage by supporting married children. There is no mention of married children on issue of protection of children from child marriage. Such silence equals to denial of protecting those who are already violated.

Education being the single most predictive factor for protection against child marriage remains the most effective conduit for challenging prevailing child marriage practice in the guise of tradition, culture, and religion. While education gives protection against it, girls in poorer households are more likely to drop out before they reach secondary school. Thus, the key is to give more protection to the vulnerable regions, rural girls, urban slum population, etc. with respect to continuing education and improve the quality of education. This may include cash transfers to poor families on condition of girls' attending schools.

Advocacy should constitute a major strategy against child marriage, dowry, and violence wherein multi-sector involvement should be sought. Inclusion of issues of child marriage, dowry, and violence in the textbooks at the primary and secondary level should be one of the important strategies for educating and empowering adolescents and altering their mindset. Imparting life skills should be more prioritized in the education curriculum for equipping young people to handle the challenges they face from within and outside family.

Enforcement of birth and marriage registration systems is crucial in restraining child marriage. Empowering marriage registrars through sensitizing and training and evolving an effective monitoring system for making them accountable on this issue should be a major focus for enforcement of birth and marriage registration system.

Appropriate framework for elimination of child marriage requires more synergy and harmonization between and among social policies and five-year plan. Integrating the issue of child marriage with social sector framework is crucial for building national programmes and interventions for elimination of child marriage. Laws, policies, and programmes for elimination of child marriage should be woven around poverty, vulnerability, discrimination, abuse, violence, and dowry. Child marriage restraining programmes needs to involve multiple sectors, follow multiple approaches, target multiple stakeholders and work at multiple levels.

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