

Ending Child Marriage in Bangladesh

Context and background

Bangladesh has the fourth highest prevalence of child marriage in the world. 51% of young women in Bangladesh were married before their 18th birthday (MICS 2019, UNICEF & BBS). In line with SDG goal 5.3, Bangladesh has developed 'National Plan of Action (NPA) to End Child Marriage 2018-2030' and targeted to achieve zero child marriage before age of 15 by 2021. Also, it was targeted to reduce rate of child marriage for children aged between 15-18 years to one-third by 2021. Government also targeted to eradicate child marriage from the country by 2041. However, despite significant progress in recent years, Bangladesh witnessed a large increase in child marriages during the COVID-19 pandemic which has come out in different studies.

Child Rights Governance and Child Protection sector of Save the Children in Bangladesh (SCiBD) has been working on Child Marriage

at local and national level for a long period through awareness raising, capacity building, advocacy and resilience building of children and youth. Under Local to Global (LtG) program, in 2019, SCiBD in partnership with Breaking the Silence (BTS) started a campaign on child marriage to mobilize and engage adolescents and youth of all Union Parishad's (UP) of Satkhira district. Following the local to global approach to advocacy, safe and meaningful participation of children involvement was at the core of our campaign to ending child marriage in Bangladesh. Children advocated successfully at the local, national and global level voicing their concerns and advocating for their rights.

LOCAL TO GLOBAL (LtG)

Local to Global is both a Sida-funded program implemented by Save the Children Sweden and its global partners, and a way of working with advocacy across the Save the Children global movement.

Local to Global want to see changes at local and national level, working with and for children.

Through coordinated advocacy linking local, national, regional and global levels, it seeks to amplify the voices of children as right holders, but also of local partners working with them.

With the help of Save the Children's four Global advocacy offices in Geneva, Brussels, Addis Ababa, New York and SC country offices, children and local partners can get access to regional and global platforms.



Facebook page of campaign on child marriage

Child marriage campaign: Learning from local targeting adolescent and youth to scale up at national level and to reach global level audience

As part of the program, an online campaign through Facebook was launched in 2019 with an objective to mobilize and involve a large number of adolescent and youth to raise awareness on child marriage among adolescent and youth and take oath to not to marry before the legal age in preventing child marriage. For making the campaign more attractive and acceptable, short video messages on child marriage prevention and speech of the local leaders, the Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission, human rights activists, celebrities and CSO representatives were included on the Facebook page.

Simultaneously, physical awareness-raising events were also organized in 62 schools of

Satkhira district to involve more adolescent and youth in the online campaign. At the same time, monitoring and response system were introduced in these school including installation of complaint box, dedicated hotline number, committee comprises with teacher, SMC member, parent, children etc. to prevent and respond to ending child marriage. Rafiqul, a member of the child forum at Satkhira shared, *“I joined this campaign and learned about the negative impacts of child marriage to children. I took the oath not to marry before the legal age. My friends and I will do our best to make the campaign a success to end child marriage in our locality”*.

Enthusiastic engagement of other relevant stakeholders including parent, community leader, school management committee, local government representative etc. were observed in this children and youth led initiative to end child marriage. Changes in the mindset of local level state officials and local elected individuals to prevent child marriage also resulted into reactivation of standing committee at Union Parishad (lowest tier of local government) and Upazila Parishad (local government body at sub-district level) as well as at Upazila



Pledge against child marriage during school campaign at Satkhira



Signature campaigning to end child marriage at school at Satkhira

Administration (local administration at sub-district level) to strengthen the GO-NGO collaboration in the locality in ending child marriage. Md. Yasin, a parent from Satkhira said, *“My son and daughter both go to school. They have joined the child marriage campaign through their*

classmates. I have noticed that they have a clear understanding about the harmful effect of child marriage. They are now disseminating the messages to other children and their parent to make them aware on this. I encourage their engagement and support their activities”.

To disseminate the campaign nationally and to engage relevant stakeholders and policymakers, TV talk shows were organized in 2020. As a result, the Joint Secretary of Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) and Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee of MoWCA have taken a joint plan of action together with BTS and SCiBD to implement the campaign nationally.



Child delegate along with representative from MoWCA, SCiBD and BTS in a TV talk show on ending child marriage

In 2021, child marriage campaign was scaled up at 24 districts through National Children’s Task Force (NCTF). NCTF organized different events at 24 districts to raise awareness on child marriage for children, government officials, parents, CSO, and youth. During COVID-19 pandemic situation, NCTF continued the awareness raising on child marriage using their own Facebook pages at 24 districts by providing photo and video messages for children, youth and parent. The wider dissemination of national hotline numbers through this Facebook pages for prevention of child marriage also became popular and widely been used by children and community people to report of child marriage incidents.

Shahadat, a child forum member said, *“Now, I am reading in class 10 in a madrasa (faith-based education institution) at Satkhira. I took the oath not to be married before legal age of marriage in 2019 on the Facebook page and also supported 23 of my peers of this madrasa to take the same oath. Till date, among those children (of this madrasa) took the oath, none of us get married. On the other hand, we together were able to stop 3 child marriages in our locality.”*

The campaign has so far involved 26,545 adolescent and youth (60% boy) to take oath on the campaign titled “We will not do child marriage”. In addition, 38,672 people of all ages and classes, who have learned about the harmful impact of child marriage and have a better understanding of where and how to file a complaint against it. As a result of the collaborative efforts of all the relevant stakeholders, 377 child marriages have been prevented from 2019 to 2021 at Satkhira. In most of the cases, children themselves reported about their marriage directly through national and local level hotline numbers.



Children and adolescent taking oath against child marriage at Satkhira

Jannatul, a child forum member stated, *“A few days ago, my family decided to marry me off. I strongly opposed to that, but my family didn’t listen to me. Earlier, I took an oath that I will not do child marriage. Finding no other way, I called 109 (the national hotline number for children and women) for support with the help of my friend. After that, the Upazila Women’s Affair Officer (high level state official related to children and women at sub-district level) and the UP Chairman came to our house and stopped my marriage. They also discussed with my*

parent and made them understand to support me in completing my education. Presently, I am continuing my study. Without been involved in this campaign, I would never been able to stop my marriage.”

At national level, in several consultations with the Ministry of Finance, NCTF and child forum members raised their demand for a specific budget to stop child marriage. Representatives from Ministry provided their commitment to allocate more budget for the most vulnerable children. Also, in 2020, in a virtual consultation (organized by the Ministry of Planning and SCiBD jointly) on the development of 8th Five-year plan of Bangladesh, children also provided recommendations to include plan and allocate budget to prevent child marriage. Ministry of Planning incorporated two specific demands raised by children, a) more budget for children and b) children’s involvement in the budgeting process which is reflected in the final 8th five-year plan.



Children in virtual consultation with honorable Minister for Ministry of Planning on the development of 8th Five-year plan of Bangladesh

At global level, SCiBD has supported NCTF and child forum members by empowering them in creating opportunities to share their perspectives towards duty-bearers and in increasing the voices of girls and boys from Bangladesh being heard at global level including commemorative conference on the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in Geneva in 2019, virtual session of High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York in 2020, Office of the

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) workshop on child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in 2021 etc.

Masud, a child representative from Satkhira, was able to share his views on child marriage on a global stage in front of Permanent Missions and other stakeholders at the CRC@30 years celebration. This allowed him to make the voices of children in Bangladesh heard and to call on governments to do more to uphold child rights. While in Geneva, he also had the opportunity to meet with government representatives from Bangladesh where he was able to articulate his views on child rights and child marriage to propose recommendations to promote positive change in the future. Also, the children’s comments made a positive



Masud, a child representative from Bangladesh, speaking at commemorative conference on the 30th anniversary of the CRC in Geneva, Switzerland

impression among attendees in OHCHR workshop and created space for advocacy purposes notably for the resolution on child marriage to be presented at the Human Rights Council (HRC) in September 2021 session.



Masud and other children representative from the Philippines and Kosovo with Inger Ashing, CEO of Save the Children International in Geneva, Switzerland

Our long-standing advocacy on children's meaningful participation has led to the OHCHR consultation on the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the rights of the child. The inputs received from children has shaped the HRC annual day on the rights of the child, where for the first time some Member States have conceded their speaking slot to Children.

In addition, the participation of girls at OHCHR workshops on CEFM has increased the awareness of girls' meaningful participation in UN processes. For the first time, the gender

unit of OHCHR engaged girl advocates in the expert meeting. The intervention and statement of the girls shaped the content of the workshops. After this experience, OHCHR has mentioned to be keen in continuing engaging girls in their processes, which is a big step for the institutionalization of girls' participation across the UN system. Furthermore, the Resolution on Child Marriage in time of crisis, including COVID-19 which is currently being negotiated at the HRC, requests the Office of the High Commissioner to organize the above mentioned two-full-day workshop with the participation and involvement of women and girls at risk of and those subjected to forced marriage and to collaborate with all relevant stakeholders, including, relevant United Nations agencies, funds and programs, special procedure mandate holders, international and regional organizations, scholars, national human rights institutions and civil society organizations, in order to ensure multi-stakeholder participation in the expert meeting. While the text is still being negotiated, the draft reflects our long-term advocacy, including the participation of girls in international events, which has been facilitated by the LtG program.

Finally, the Upazilla Nirbahi Officer (High level state official at sub-district level) of Satkhira reflected by saying, *"This online campaign has impacted positively on children, parent, community and government official to prevent child marriage in the area. This successful campaign can be replicated to other parts of the country in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders"*.