

Ending Child Marriage

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Since 1963, child marriage has been illegal in Nepal but it has not been abolished in practice. Factors such as lack of access to education, child labor, social pressures, dowry practices and discrimination against girl children in the family are the major contributors of such practice. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Nepal has the third-highest rate of child marriage in Asia, with more than 40 percent of girls marrying before age 18, and 10 percent before 15, though the minimum age of marriage for both women and men is 20 under Nepali law.

Nepal's government has made some effort to end the practice, but a long-promised national plan has met with delays. In 2014, at the international "Girl Summit" in London, the United Kingdom, Nepal's minister of women, children, and social welfare pledged to strive to end child marriage by 2020. By the time the Nepal government held its own national "Girl Summit" in Kathmandu in March 2016, this goal had shifted to 2030, the end date for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Experts on this subject say that the government has not done enough to end the practice of child marriage, as there is little evidence of the government working effectively to try to prevent child marriage or mitigate the harm that married children experience.

Things are a bit complicated in rural Nepal where child marriage is being practiced. For example, many parents of young girls and children do not know that child marriage is against the law, and don't see value in investing in education, especially for girls. Thus, girls at their young ages are forced to leave school and get married. Young girls can't complain to the authorities such as the police even if they know their marriage is illegal. And, even they try to complain with the support from NGOs working in this issue, the police are reluctant to file the complaint.

The April 2015 earthquake killed many people and made nearly 4 million people homeless, which has made the situation worse for child marriage. Therefore, out of desperation, many families want to marry off their daughters. Though there has been no proper survey carried out of this matter, many quake-stricken families share the similar story.

Child marriage has various negative consequences such as denial of access to education, serious health problems including death because of early pregnancy, and domestic abuse including violence, sexual violence, and abandonment. A report by the World Bank and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) suggests that child marriage will cost developing countries trillions of dollars by 2030. Likewise, young girls are more likely to suffer from uterine prolapse and obstetric fistula when they get pregnant after marriage due to underdevelopment of their reproductive organs. Girls who marry early also face an increased risk of domestic violence and psychological trauma.

In contrast, ending child marriage would have a large positive effect on the educational attainment of girls and their children, encourage women to have fewer children later in life, and increase women's expected earnings and household welfare. For example, in Nepal the benefit of reduced fertility would be almost \$1 billion.

Positive change is happening

Authorities from the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, said that there have been some changes in the law which sets the legal minimum age of marriage for both girls and boys at 20. Violators of this law will be jailed for three years and fined about US \$95.

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But experts argue that this punishment as a government policy to end child marriage is too weak.

Nevertheless, things are changing for the better. The Nepal National Demographic Health Survey conducted in 2001 shows that 40 percent of girls between the ages of 15-19 were married, whereas similar surveys show the figure has been dropping to 32.2 percent in 2006, and 28.8 percent in 2011. This is a positive trend, and makes us believe that changes will happen for sure though it takes some time. Officials of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) believe that education is the best way to reduce child marriage; however, the challenge is that Nepal has a high dropout rate among girls, who are 10 times more likely to get married.



In the first picture Mrs. Nibnana Khatun married at the age of 14 years and gave birth to three children. In the second picture Mrs. Sahila Marik married at the age of 15 years.