



Until we are all equal

Equipped with knowledge of their rights and supported by community allies, girls are standing up for themselves and saying no to child, early and forced marriage.



Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh

Education and skills-training initiatives are having a big impact on the lives of 123,000 girls and boys.



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Traveling between villages on a bicycle donated by the program, Sweeti is a passionate advocate for girls' rights and health.

Opposite page: Sweeti speaks to her peers about the dangers of early marriage.

The First Word

For over five years, our Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project has supported the rights of girls to decide if, when and whom to marry.

Child, early and forced marriage is a complex global issue, one that disproportionately affects girls. Of all of the children who get married before age 18, 82% are girls. Extreme poverty, cultural traditions and a lack of education and economic opportunities are the key drivers of early marriage. At the heart of this issue is gender inequality — a belief that sons are better able to contribute financially to their families than daughters.

Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of early marriage in South Asia. Of the approximately 38 million girls, 51% get married before the age of 18, and 22% get married before the age of 15. They are often compelled to drop out of school and exposed to physical, sexual and emotional violence in their new homes. Thrust into such horrendous

experiences, they face a higher risk of mental health issues, childbirth complications and maternal death.

Plan International's Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh (CEMB) project has been active in the country since 2018.

"This project is really important because it's tackling a major issue in the country," says Roshan Tabari-Cherer, program manager at Plan International Canada. "It has been a great success in changing perceptions at the community level and piloting different approaches to tackling child marriage. Girls around the world should be able to decide whom they marry and when."

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

Thanks to your generous contributions over the past five years, more than 123,000 girls and boys have learned about adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence, child protection and gender equality. Parents, community organizations and government officials have also learned how to create long-lasting change toward preventing child, early and forced marriage in Bangladesh.



“

I learned about the dangers of child marriage by attending courtyard meetings. I understand now that it is very important for a woman to be financially independent. Not only boys can take responsibility for the family — girls can do it too. Women's empowerment is possible by combatting child marriage.”

— Khadija, 18,
project participant
(Learn more about her
story on page 10.)

Thank you for your
continued support.

Project facts

WHAT: The Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project is implemented by Plan International Canada and Plan International Bangladesh. It is funded by Global Affairs Canada and Canadian donors.

WHO: Girls, boys, parents and community members learn about child, early and forced marriage and about girls' rights to decide if, when and whom to marry. Local implementing partners included Resource Development Foundation, Shushilan, National Development Programme, Young Power in Social Action, Friends in Village Development Bangladesh, Dhaka Assania Mission, Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service, Rupantar and Green Hill.

WHERE: The Bhola and Jhalokathi districts in the Barishal Division of Bangladesh, as well as 39 districts across the other seven divisions of the country.

WHEN: The project started in June 2018 and ended in December 2023. This report highlights progress from Year 5: July 1, 2022, to June 20, 2023. (Final project survey results are not yet available.)

WHY: The primary goals of the project are to:

- Increase the agency of adolescents, especially girls, to protect themselves from harmful gender norms and practices, such as child, early and forced marriage, and to access economic-justice opportunities.
- Improve community acceptance of norms that value girls as well as actions that support girls and boys to delay marriage.
- Increase the responsiveness of governments at the national, district and sub-district levels to prevent and respond to children's-rights violations, particularly early and forced marriage among girls.



A purohita (Hindu priest) advises parents on the adverse consequences of early marriage.

The Situation

Despite progress, millions of girls in Bangladesh are being married in childhood and denied their fundamental human rights.

Bangladesh is a small, densely populated country that neighbours India in the Bay of Bengal. It has lush tropical forests and flat, fertile land that is ideal for growing rice, tea and other crops. Agriculture and the ready-made-garment industry are big drivers of the country's economy, which has been growing steadily over the past few decades.

However, despite increased development and a reduction in poverty, Bangladesh continues to see high levels of child, early and forced marriage, particularly in rural coastal districts. This is due to a variety of reasons, including:

NATURAL DISASTERS

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to climate-change-based and seasonal disasters such as floods, cyclones and earthquakes. When these occur, they often destroy homes and disrupt livelihoods, which worsens poverty. This, in turn, leads to food insecurity, compelling more families to resort to early marriage. In the last year alone, hundreds of thousands of people in Bangladesh were affected by two major cyclones and flash floods.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

As is the case in many parts of the world, Bangladesh has seen a rise in inflation following the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite ample food stocks, food prices have shot up across the country, with rural areas seeing food inflation hit a 12-year high of 12.8%. This restricts purchasing power, especially for lower-income households. In August 2022, oil prices also spiked to a record high, adding to everyday living and business costs. All of these financial challenges increase the likelihood of early marriage.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Globally, years of early-marriage-prevention progress was reversed as a result of the pandemic. The number of child, early and forced marriages spiked due to a combination of factors, such as families experiencing reduced income due to job or business losses, girls staying at home because of school shutdowns and millions of male workers returning to their communities during lockdown periods. It's estimated that close to 14,000 girls across 21 districts in Bangladesh were forced into marriage between April and October of 2020 alone.

A SHIFT IN GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

In 2017, the Bangladesh government updated the 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act, which banned marriages for girls under the age of 18. The revised version includes harsher penalties for lawbreakers but controversially also allows child marriage under "special circumstances." The government also launched a National Action Plan in 2018 to end child marriage in the coming decades, but progress has been slow. This is partially due to the prioritization of funding for COVID-19 and climate-disaster relief rather than child-marriage prevention.



Akhi, a project participant, educates her peers about the harmful effects of early marriage.

The Rundown



You've helped provide life-changing educational and economic opportunities for girls in Bangladesh that will support them in saying "no" to early marriage. Here are some of the noteworthy achievements from the last year of the Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project, made possible with your contributions.

“From the Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project, I have learned about the negative effects of child marriage. I will not participate in child marriage, and I will not let my sisters, who are both attending school, marry early.”

– Rasil, who works as a driver to support his sisters' education, after receiving training through the project

123,055 girls and boys in school learned about adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence, child protection and gender equality.

1,032 mothers and fathers were trained on valuing the girl child, child-marriage issues, the importance of girls' education and the development of action plans for combatting child marriage in everyday and disaster situations.

38 workshops were organized for child-marriage-prevention committees to

strengthen their district implementation plans to combat early, child and forced marriage.

464 girl-childbirth celebrations were held to change mindsets around son preference and to encourage girls' education and economic justice to prevent child marriage.

62,916 community members were reached through awareness messages about the consequences of child marriage, the Child Marriage Restraint Act and child-marriage-prevention hotlines.

1,754 participants of the self-employment training program opened bank accounts to support girls' future aspirations, such as continuing their studies or moving to other places for their careers.

114 child marriages were stopped by the Child, Early and Forced Marriage Reporting and Response Protocol Committee and local government administration.

2,392 out-of-school girls and boys, as well as their adult family members, received training in self-employment skills.

Note: Year 5 results only. Final project survey results are not yet available.

A STORY OF CHANGE

Speaking Up

Secondary-school student Reshma took action to prevent her own early marriage.

Reshma, the daughter of a fisherman in a remote Bhola village, was in Grade 10 when her parents told her she would be getting married. Her father was struggling to provide two servings of bread daily for the family and needed a way to alleviate their poverty. Reshma's sister had gotten married even younger — in Grade 8 — so it wasn't something unusual for their family.

But Reshma was scared; she didn't want to get married so young. At school, she had learned about the Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project, which could help in situations such as hers. She called the project's field facilitator, who counselled her to inform her teacher of the Reporting and Response Protocol Committee. Reshma also contacted emergency services. Once her teacher learned about Reshma's situation, he and five other members of the committee visited her house. They advised Reshma's parents about the harmful effects of child, early and forced marriage as well as the law banning child marriage.

Reshma's parents were told the police would come to their home if they decided to go ahead with the marriage. Worried about the consequences, they cancelled the wedding plans. As a result of the intervention, Reshma's parents have



changed their mindset and decided to send their daughter to a madrasah regularly to focus on her education.

“I felt immense joy and relief,” Reshma says. “I am determined to continue my studies and fulfill my parents' dreams for me to be independent.”

Reshma with her mother

A STORY OF CHANGE

Changing Attitudes

Hanif used to wish for sons, but now he is celebrating his daughters.

Hanif is a tea seller who lives with his wife, Mili, in Bangladesh's Jhalokathi district. When Hanif's third daughter, Tisha, was born, Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project staff organized a girl-childbirth celebration. Hanif's backyard was brightly decorated, and community members attended with gifts for the newborn girl.

Guests included teachers, imams and the project's Champion Fathers and Mothers, who made speeches highlighting girls' and women's career achievements in the community. They emphasized that if girls are supported and given an education rather than being forced to marry young, they can support the household as well as a male child can.

Celebrating the birth of a girl is unusual in the country; parents often favour sons since they typically provide their aging parents with financial support.

When Hanif and Mili became the parents of a girl for the first time, Hanif welcomed her happily. But after the birth of a second daughter and then a third, Hanif became increasingly depressed. He and his family blamed Mili and lashed out in anger at her. After Tisha's birth, Hanif even stopped speaking

to Mili. As a result of years of torment about this issue, Mili's mental health deteriorated.

When project staff learned about this situation through the community, they decided to approach Hanif. They spoke with him to challenge his beliefs about girls being a burden on the family and encouraged a girl-childbirth celebration. Hanif agreed. He welcomed the guests and listened to their speeches and then apologized to his wife for mistreating her.

"I realized my mistake," Hanif says. "I was worried about my future due to the repeated births of daughters in my family, but I was wrong. The celebration has changed the negative mindset of our society. From now on, I will take care of my daughters and provide them with a better life."

A girl-childbirth celebration in Jhalokathi



Central to the issue of gender inequality is a belief that sons are better able to contribute financially to their families than daughters.

These girls are members of a youth club organized by the Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project.



Khadija received vocational training on computer programming and is now teaching her peers.

A STORY OF CHANGE

A Better Future

Eighteen-year-old Khadija was being pressured to marry but decided to pursue skills training instead.

From a young age, Khadija knew she wanted a good education to get ahead in life. Even when the path wasn't easy, she found a way to pursue her goal. For example, when her father, a grocer, couldn't afford to pay her secondary-school fees, she tutored younger students to earn the money herself.

After high school, Khadija dreamed of studying further to become a doctor, but her family's financial situation had worsened after her father became ill and they lost their home due to river erosion. With no means to obtain a higher education, Khadija was being pressured by family and relatives to get married.

Around that time, a staff member from Shushilan — a development organization and partner in Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh — visited Khadija's home to ask if she wanted to participate in project activities. Khadija agreed and soon learned that the project offered support for technical training. She decided to enrol in a computer-software program, despite warnings from family and community members who feared she would be exposed to trafficking.

In the summer of 2021, Khadija completed a three-month course at a technical training centre in Bhola, earning

outstanding results. Her next goal was to find work. In March 2022, with the support of Shushilan staff, she interviewed at a bank. She successfully secured the job and now works as a computer operator.

Khadija earns a monthly salary of BDT10,000 (CAD\$125), which she uses to support her sister's education and contribute to household expenses. She is the only girl in her community who works, and she has become an inspiration for other young people. In addition, she has used her earnings to enrol in a Bachelor of Arts program to help her get an even better job in the future.

"I used to be a burden to my family, but now they value my opinion," Khadija says. "The misconceptions of society have also come to an end."

She says she has also grown on a personal level. In the past, Khadija says, she was afraid to talk to new people and had limited knowledge of the working world, but today she is proud to have overcome her fears. "After being involved in the Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project, I learned to understand the outside world and how to change my life," she says.



Naimur, an adolescent participant in the Combatting Early Marriage project, speaks to his peers.

Thank you for your support for this project.

Thank you for ensuring a better future for thousands of girls and young women in Bangladesh. In its fifth and final year, the Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project continues to help prevent child, early and forced marriages as well as provide valuable skills training. This has increased adolescent girls' ability to continue their education, stay healthy and contribute financially to their households. Many have developed a greater sense of agency over their lives, while families and community allies are better able to uphold their rights.

Thank you again for your continued support.

“Due to the implementation of the Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh protocol, the rate of child marriage has been reduced to a large extent in Tajumuddin Upazila [a sub-unit of the Bhola District]. If it is further implemented, and implemented properly, it will not take much time to bring [the rate of] child marriage to zero.”

— Moriyom Begum, head of Tajumuddin Upazila



Until we are all equal



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**HUMANITARIAN
COALITION** 

Sumaiya is a project participant who received technical training on batik-blok design and handpainting and now has her own business.

**For more information,
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About Plan International Canada

Plan International Canada is a member of a global organization dedicated to advancing children's rights and equality for girls. Plan International has been building powerful partnerships with and for children for over 85 years and is now active in more than 80 countries. We stand with children, especially girls, wherever they are oppressed, exploited, left behind or not equally valued. We're determined optimists, and we will continue to persevere until we are all equal.