

Ethiopia: A Focus on Child Marriage II

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The plenary sessions were interesting. Case studies were presented by representatives of organisations working to ending child marriage in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Senegal and Yemen. It is appropriate to begin with a definition of child marriage from the participants' perspective. A guide for global policy action produced by two leading participating organisations, the International Planned Parenthood Federation IPPF and UNFPA define child marriage, also known as early marriage as “any marriage carried out before the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and child bearing.” The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that marriage should be ‘entered only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses’. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the laws applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”

The policy guide stress that research has shown that in many societies in developing countries, child marriages are used to build alliances between families. Sometimes this may even include the betrothals of young children or babies. There is often an element of coercion involved in such marriages where parents, guardians or families pressurise, collude or force children into marriage. It was observed that girls are being socialized into accepting child marriage as a norm and many give their consent as a duty and sign of respect.

Many presentations highlighted the scope of the problem. The number of females married between 10-19 for ten countries was an eye opener. In India, 44.5% of females are married under age 18 involving 113, 560 000 girls. In Indonesia, 22% - 21,523 000 girls, Bangladesh 66%-15,503 000, Nigeria 39%- 15,282,000, Ethiopia 49.2% -8,937,000, Egypt 16.6% -7,920,000, Uganda 46-3%-3,455,000, Mali 70.6 %- 1,525,000, Niger 74%-1,481,000, Chad 71.5%- 1,132,000 girls.

Experts said data shows that child marriage is decreasing but the pace is painfully slow. Participants explored why the practice persists and observed that although

most countries have passed laws declaring 18 as the minimum age of marriage, the laws are not often enforced and social, economic and cultural realities perpetuate the practice. Poverty and low levels of education are also cited as predisposing factors. Among poor families with scarce resources to support girl children in school and for providing basic necessities such as clothing and adequate feeding, the bride price often paid to parents by suitors often serves as an incentive to marry off their children early.

The presentations highlighted the fact that child marriage infringes on the right of women. It is also an obstacle to achieving the Millennium Development Goals because it fuels poverty, hinders achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, improving maternal and child health. They underscore the fact that delaying the age of marriage and child bearing can improve the health of the mother and her child. Research has shown that childbirth complications are the leading cause of death for girls ages 15-19 in developing countries. Prolonged and obstructed labour also leads to obstetric fistula better known as Vesico Vaginal Fistula VVF, a debilitating medical condition. Nigeria has one of the highest number of fistulae patients awaiting surgery. Bishop Desmond Tutu, the Chairman of the Elders said he was shocked at the prevalence of child marriage in a rural community they visited in Northern Ethiopia.

In my contribution, I cited Nigeria's National Demographic Health Survey which shows that in Kaduna State, where I live, and my NGO AdvocacyNigeria is implementing a reduction of maternal mortality project, 60.5 % of girls are likely to be married before 18 years of age. I also drew the attention of the Elders to a police raid at Heda Clinic in Aba, Abia state on June 2 2011 where 32 pregnant teens were planning to deliver and sell their babies to buyers who resell the babies to childless couples. One of the girls told the police that they sell each baby for 30,000 naira and depending on the sex of the babies; they are resold for as much as one million naira. Boys fetch more money because in Igbo land they can inherit land whereas girls do not. So beyond the issue of early marriage is another more devastating dimension early exposure to sexual activities, sexually transmitted diseases, abandoned babies and child trafficking. During the tea break, one of the Elders Graca Machel of South Africa expressed shock at the complexity of the issue adding that any intervention must address these.

Some of the effective interventions described in the presentations included; provision of information and facilitated community discussion on gender equality, leading to the abolition of harmful practices and the empowerment of girls and women; improved services, especially education and incentives to keep girls in school as well as programmes to support married girls. Others include the establishment and implementation of legal frameworks that reflect international conventions and human rights standards. It was repeatedly stated that these interventions cannot succeed in isolation; efforts must be complementary and interlinked. In subsequent discussions, participants emphasised the need for a holistic, multi-faceted, rights-based approach to ending child marriage.

Recognising that ending child marriage requires discussion within communities, leading to a collective agreement to end the practice, they stressed that global and national efforts should ultimately support local change. Encouragingly, participants feel that change is already taking place, and that an Alliance will help to accelerate that process. Scaling up would enable a far larger number of communities to better fulfill the potential of their children, especially their girls. A number of participants said they wanted to build national alliances for change, as well as a global Alliance. The panelists discussed successful collaborative efforts involving government, international agencies, civil society and local communities to address child marriage. They also discussed their aim to scale up these projects.

On the second day of the meeting, participants discussed how to build an Alliance to end child marriage. They reflected on lessons learned from successful coalitions and discussed the mission statement, membership principles and objectives of the Alliance, as well as organisational practicalities. Participants want the Alliance to help develop common language and messaging on the issue of child marriage, as well as allow for the sharing of information on best practices, with an emphasis on local-level change with global support. The Alliance will draw attention to the need for more information on the magnitude of child marriage, as well as programmatic initiatives that have helped to prevent or end it. By raising awareness, the Alliance also aims to mobilize political will and financial and other resources to address child marriage and provide support for married girls. At the end of the meeting, participants declared their support for the creation of an Alliance and willingness to work together to achieve it. They expressed their

commitment to the establishment of an Alliance that embraces the core values of trust, transparency, collaboration and respect.