

Stop Tying the Knot: Child Marriage in Malawi and Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article explores the prevalence of child marriages in Malawi and Bangladesh. Both countries still have extremely high rates of child marriage despite taking steps to try to end the harmful practice. Malawi formalized legislation in 2017 hoping to end child marriages and Bangladesh has pledged to end these unions by 2041. Additionally, this article analyzes ethical questions relating to child marriage and the cultural, political, and economic reasons for the prevalence of such an institution. While both countries struggle with this issue, each has attempted different solutions and faced different obstacles in their efforts to end child marriages.

I. Introduction

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) and Executive Director of UN Women, is known for having stated that “achieving gender equality is about disrupting the status quo – not negotiating it.”¹ Unfortunately, the status quo is that child marriage is still prevalent in many countries around the world. The UN estimates that worldwide roughly 39,000 girls under the age of 18 are married every day.² The effects that this has on girls are many, including that they lose their opportunity to control their own lives. It is also a violation of these girls’ basic human rights.

Looking at the percentage of girls getting married before age 18, Bangladesh has the eighth highest rate of child marriage in the world, Malawi is ranked tenth.³ Both are developing countries that have tried to implement policies in hopes of eliminating child marriages. However, as will be detailed further below, rates are still high in both countries, with 58.6 percent and 42.1 percent of women getting married before they are 18 years old, respectively in Bangladesh and Malawi.

This article examines how child marriage harms girls and deters progression towards gender equality in Malawi and Bangladesh. It also looks at proven solutions and potential solutions to this problem and explores how child marriage affects other development issues in these countries.

¹ As quoted at: <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1786704/Phumzile-Mlambo-Ngcuka-Achieving-gender-equality-is-about-disrupting-the-status-quo-not>.

² United Nations Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth (2013).

³ United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2021), Table 12.

Child marriage is highly intertwined with women's rights and its widespread presence is one important factor in perpetuating gender inequality.

This article is structured into six sections. Following this introduction, section II will present a brief literature review of articles relating to the topic of child marriage in both of these countries and around the world. Section III will provide information on the socio-economic background of Malawi and Bangladesh. Section IV will analyze the evolution and history of child marriage as an institution and section V will analyze the subsequent ethical issues and arguments that come with it. The final section will provide conclusions about the arguments presented in the article.

II. Literature Review

As a result of the prevalence of child marriage around the world, there is extensive research done on this issue. Melnikas et al. (2021) and Hayes (2016) focus exclusively on Malawi, though Hayes examines the overall culture and other factors relating to inequality. Kamal (2012) specifically looks at Bangladesh. Varia (2016) focuses on ending child marriage in developing countries all over the globe. Lee-Rife et al. (2012) analyze the solutions to child marriage and reviews what works and what doesn't. All of the above literature provides unique and necessary insight and analysis into the issue of child marriage.

- Melnikas et al. (2021) examine marriage laws and their enforcement in Malawi through qualitative research. The team looked at statistics of child marriage and adolescent childbearing in Malawi and used this to inform a study about marriage laws and how the authorities in Malawi enforce them. This underscores the importance of enforcement of marriage laws as a solution and why certain countries are failing at eradicating the institution. Additionally, one conclusion that was reached was that imposing fines as a solution has failed because it has driven the practice of child marriage underground and could be associated negative effects on young girls. This shows that certain solutions may not actually be effective in practice. It may be necessary to get rid of solutions when they are found to be ineffective.
- Hayes (2016) looks at contemporary Malawian ideas about gender as a vehicle to connect ideas about structural violence, marriage, and sexual landscape. The paper argues that the colonial introduction of labor migration for men and extreme gender inequalities permanently altered gender roles in the country. It examines the differences between pre-colonial and post-colonial Malawi and explains that women had significantly more agency while husbands had very little authority over their wives before colonialism. This is evident of the way in which colonialism led to the destabilization of marriage and many of the societal gender issues seen today in Malawi.
- Kamal (2012) focuses on declines in child marriage and the effect it has had on reproductive outcomes in Bangladesh. The paper found that women who married younger were at much higher risk for serious health problems during pregnancy and that there were significant psychological and health related consequences for women who married younger. Additionally, child marriage has been found to be a barrier to social and individual development and that girls who were able to get educated were much less likely to be married before the age of 18. This shows that there are known solutions that can be implemented in the fight to end child marriage.

- Varia (2016) analyzes Human Rights Watch investigations in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, South Sudan, Tanzania, Yemen, and Zimbabwe. The outcomes of these investigations show that there are considerable lifelong consequences to child marriage including marital rape, domestic violence, exploitation, and other health problems. However, the paper also explains that there is a newfound global interest in ending child marriage and there is the potential for this to bring about new solutions and resources to help with these issues. This suggests that there is a possibility of a stronger push to end the institution from global influences and that there may be new solutions to address this issue.
- Lee-Rife et al. (2012) look specifically at what solutions are successful in ending child marriage. The article reviews 23 child marriage prevention programs employing a variety of approaches and evaluation strategies in developing countries. It examines how the programs that have been implemented have worked – or not worked and what their limitations were. Programs that had incentives or looked to empower young girls seemed to be the most effective in preventing marriages. This is evident of what efforts are most necessary in preventing the practice of child marriages and where attention needs to be drawn in attempts to implement solutions.

III. Socio-economic Background

Figure 1 shows the purchasing power parity (PPP)-adjusted GDP per capita of Bangladesh and Malawi from 1990 to 2019. It is evident that Bangladesh has seen a steady growth of GDP per capita over this time period, while that of Malawi has increased only slightly. Bangladesh's GDP per capita increased 3.1 times (from \$1,518 in 1990 to 4,754 in 2019), while Malawi's increased only 1.6 times (from \$671 in 1990 to \$1060 in 2019). This shows that Bangladesh is much better off than Malawi is in terms of GDP per capita, largely due to a demographic dividend, a booming garments sector, stable macroeconomic conditions, as well as its geographically strategic location with maritime access.⁴ Malawi, on the other hand is landlocked, with its economy heavily dependent on agriculture, employing nearly 80 percent of the population.⁵ However, both countries are still considered to be poor countries, with 52.5 percent and 89.6 percent of the population living below \$3.20 a day, respectively in Bangladesh and Malawi in 2016.⁶

Figure 2 illustrates the life expectancy of citizens at birth in years in Bangladesh and Malawi from 1970 to 2018. Both countries have experienced relatively steady growth since 1970, with Bangladesh's life expectancy being 46.9 years in 1970 and 72.3 years in 2018, and Malawi's life expectancy being 39.7 years in 1970 and 63.7 years in 2018. However, Malawi's life expectancy exhibits a downturn in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This can be attributed to a series of factors. Reduced funding in the health sector due to much of the government's budget being spent on debt repayment had the unintended consequence of bolstering the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Malawi, which eventually hit a peak during this time period.⁷

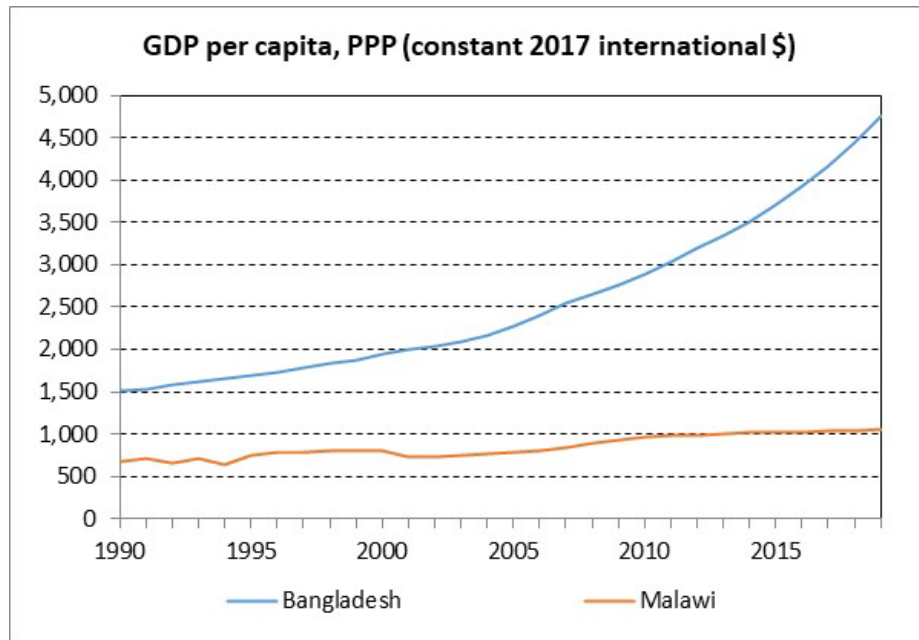
⁴ World Bank (2021b) and Rahmatullah (2013).

⁵ World Bank (2021c) and World Bank (2021a).

⁶ World Bank (2021a).

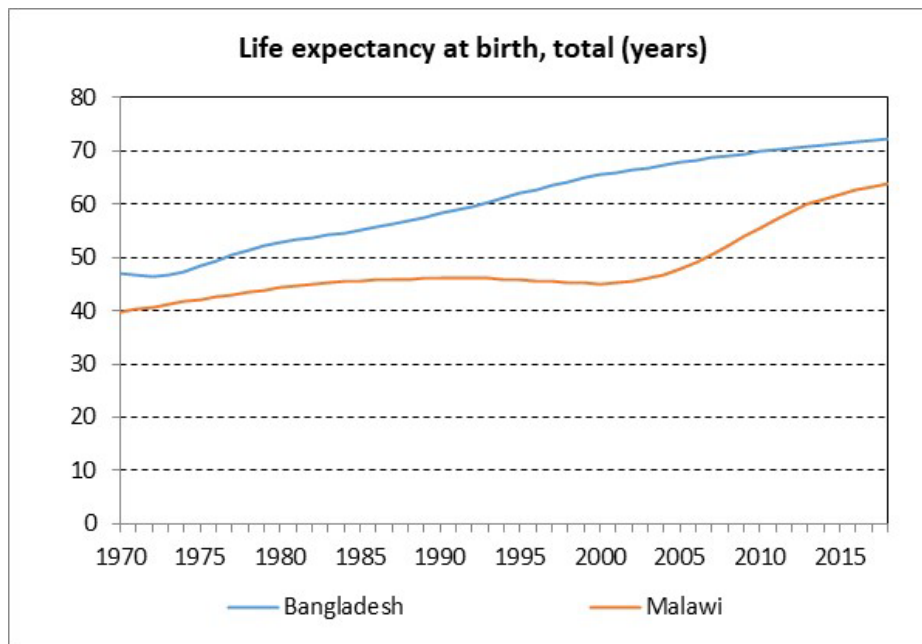
⁷ Matchaya (2007).

Figure 1: GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$), 1990-2019



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2021a).

Figure 2: Life expectancy at birth, total (years) 1970-2018



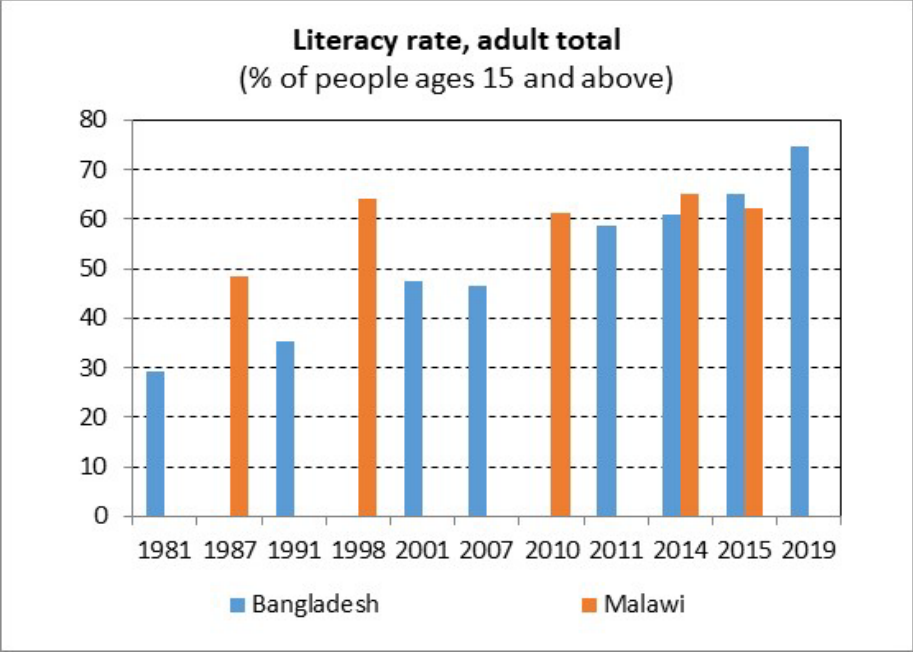
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2021a).

Figure 3 shows the literacy rate of people aged 15 and above in Bangladesh and Malawi for all available years. Where Bangladesh has seen significant improvements in its literacy rates, being

at 29.2 percent in 1981 and increasing to 74.7 percent in 2019, Malawi has struggled with keeping progress going, improving literacy rates from 48.5 percent in 1987 to a peak of 65.1 percent in 2014, before dropping in 2015 to 62.1 percent.

Bangladesh’s much improved literacy rate coincides with a fairly large increase in GDP per capita and steady increases in life expectancy. However, it is hard to pinpoint any specific causes for Malawi’s varying literacy rates, besides policy-neglect in the education sector. It is especially troubling that Malawi’s literacy rate decreased by 3.0 percentage points from 2014 to 2015, while Bangladesh’s literacy rate increased by 4.0 percentage points during the same period.

Figure 3: Adult Literacy Rate (percent of people aged 15 and above), all available years



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2021a).

IV. Analysis of Facts

This section analyzes the evolution of child marriage in Bangladesh and Malawi throughout recent history. It first looks at the prevalence of child marriage in both of these countries (Section IV.1.) and then at other factors related to women’s and girls’ rights that have been proven to either exacerbate or help to prevent child marriage (Section IV.2.).

IV.1. Prevalence of Child Marriage in Bangladesh and Malawi

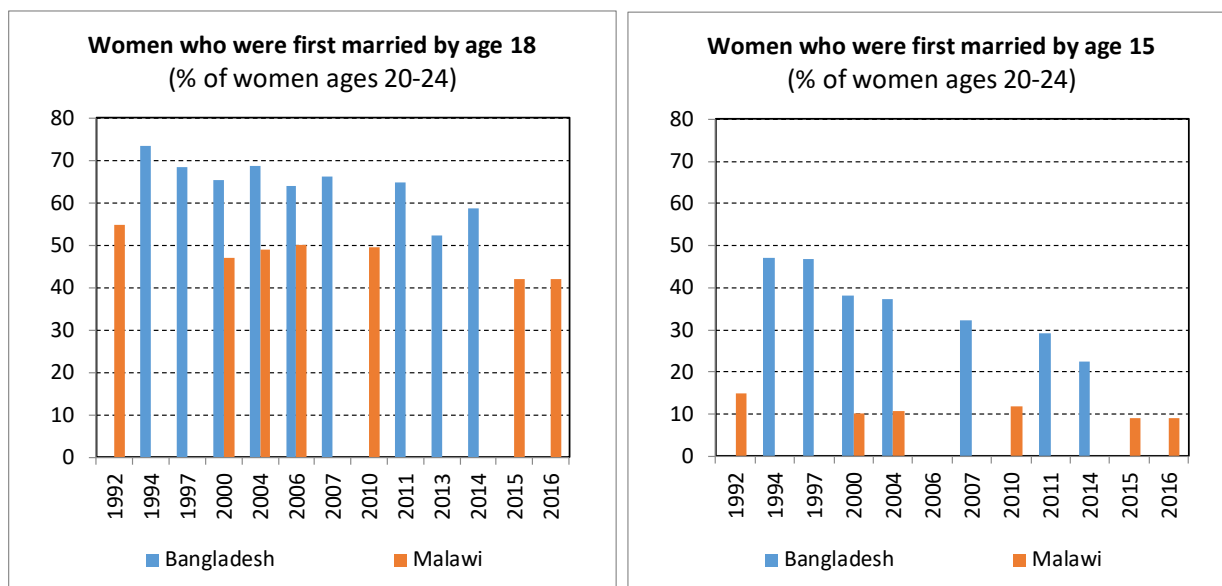
Figure 4 illustrates the percent of women who were first married by age 18 among women aged 20 to 24 years in Bangladesh and Malawi for all available years. It shows that the rate of child marriage in Bangladesh has always been higher than in Malawi. Both countries have seen a general, though very slight, decline in the rates of marriages of women under the age of 18. In Bangladesh, child marriage decreased from a high of 73.3 percent in 1994 to 58.6 percent in 2014; in Malawi, it decreased from 54.9 percent in 1992 to 42.1 percent in 2016. However, progress has

been uneven in both countries, with the percentage of girls getting married before they are 18 showing some volatility, especially in Bangladesh.

Figure 5 shows the percent of women who were first married by age 15 among women aged 20 to 24 years in Bangladesh and Malawi for all available years. The rate of child marriage by 15 is much higher in Bangladesh than in Malawi. Malawi has seen a very slight decline in its rate while Bangladesh has seen a much more dramatic one with Bangladesh at 22.4 percent in 2014, down from 47.2 percent in 1994, and Malawi's rate at 9.0 percent in 2015, down from 14.8 percent in 1991. However, Bangladesh's rate is still quite high, nearly three times the level of Malawi for the most recent similar years such data is available.

Comparing Figures 4 and 5 with each other, it is noteworthy that Bangladesh's rate is disproportionately higher than Malawi's for the percentage of women who were first married by age 15 than by age 18. Another key observation across Figures 4 and 5 is that Bangladesh's progress with reducing child marriages is much more profound than Malawi's progress for the percentage of women who were first married by age 15 than by age 18. Clearly, there has been more pressure on reducing child marriages below age 15 than for reducing child marriages below age 18.

Figures 4 and 5: Women Who Were First Married by Age 18 and Women Who Were First Married by Age 15 (percent of women aged 20-24), all available years



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2021a).

IV.2. Factors Affecting Child Marriage

Given the severe lack of data for net school enrollment for Malawi, Figures 6 and 7 show the gender parity index, respectively for gross secondary and gross tertiary school enrollment. It can be seen that the gap between girls and boys in school enrollment has been very high in the 1980s.

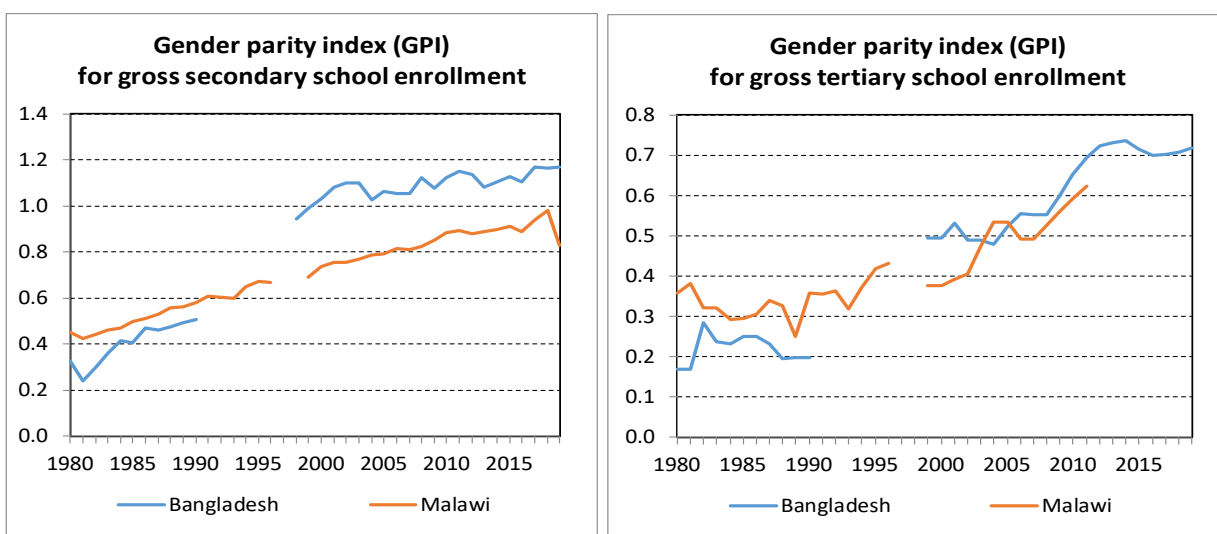
With regards to gross secondary school enrollment (shown in Figure 6), the gender gap index was always below 50 percent during the 1980s in Bangladesh and around 50 percent in Malawi during the same time period. The situation changed drastically in Bangladesh, where more girls than boys

were enrolled in secondary school since year 2000, while progress was more gradual in Malawi, where gender parity was nearly reached in 2017, but then deteriorated significantly in 2018.

With regards to gross tertiary school enrollment (shown in Figure 7), gender parity is far from being achieved, despite significant progress in both countries over the last few decades. As of 2019, the gender parity index stood at 0.72 in Bangladesh. In Malawi, the gender parity index reached 0.62 in 2011, which is the last year such data is available for Malawi. These trends are important steps forward as continued education for women is cited as one of the most important factors in preventing child marriage.

There is considerable evidence that education for girls generally has a positive impact on preventing child marriage. This is significant as girls who attend less schooling are more likely to be married younger and girls who are married young typically stop attending school.⁸ A lack of education also leads to a smaller support system for girls who miss out on necessary skills and connections that would allow them to have a better chance of getting their children and families out of poverty.⁹ All of this is important evidence as to why education for girls specifically matters in the case of fighting against child marriage.

Figures 6 and 7: Gender Parity Index for Gross Secondary and Tertiary School Enrollment



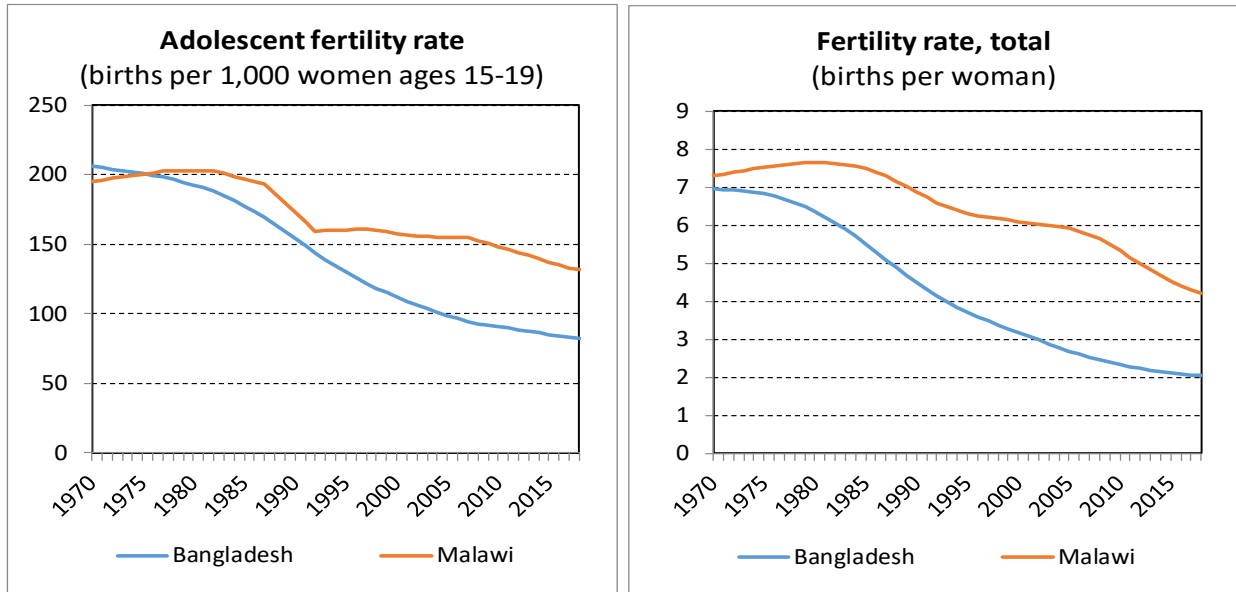
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2021a).

Figure 8 looks at adolescent fertility rate from 1970-2018 in both Bangladesh and Malawi, which is defined as births per 1,000 women ages 15-19 years old. Both rates have declined fairly steadily over the past two decades with Bangladesh starting at 206 births in 1970 and decreasing to 82 births in 2018 and Malawi starting at 195 births in 1970 and decreasing to 132 births in 2018. Though declining adolescent fertility rates are a positive sign, comparing adolescent fertility rates with overall fertility rates (shown in Figure 9) indicates that part of the decline in adolescent fertility is partly due to the overall declining fertility rates, i.e., social changes that go beyond the initiatives to reduce child marriages.

⁸ Lee-Rife et al. (2012).

⁹ Lee-Rife et al. (2012).

Figures 8 and 9: Adolescent Fertility Rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19) and Total Fertility Rate (birth per woman), 1970-2018



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2021a).

Early marriages typically imply that women enter into a sexual union and hence, exposure to childbearing starts very early.¹⁰ This is generally negative as there is a much higher probability of child mortality in women who have children as adolescents as they are more prone to many maternal risk factors.¹¹ Additionally, when young women have children, they are highly unlikely to continue to get an education afterwards as they typically must stay home and take care of their children. This also means that they are very unlikely to be employed, which is one factor that typically allows women more protection and agency in their marriage and contributes to a more equal relationship between them and their husbands.¹²

V. Ethical Origins and Framework

This section examines the ethical origins and framework behind child marriage in Bangladesh and Malawi. The first sub-section will discuss the existing structures in both countries working towards abolition of child marriage. The second sub-section will look at the future ethical approaches to ending child marriages in both countries.

V.1. Existing Structures and Responses in Bangladesh and Malawi

As was shown in the previous section, in terms of child marriage rates, Bangladesh is much worse off than Malawi, though both countries' rates are still very high in the grand scheme of the world. The fight to abolish child marriage in both of these countries is ongoing but faces difficulties

¹⁰ Kamal (2012).

¹¹ Kamal (2012).

¹² Kamal (2012).

because of how deeply intertwined child marriage is with many complex issues and social mores. The practice of child marriage has been happening for many decades if not centuries in both of these places and is so normalized within these cultures that it is difficult to break the cycle. Because marrying girls off early makes financial sense for many families in developing countries, many parents consent to it, which is also a common loophole in laws prohibiting child marriage.

Recent legislation has not done much to help with this issue in Bangladesh. At the Girl Summit in London in July 2014, Bangladesh made a goal to end marriage of girls under 15 by 2021 though that has not happened. Bangladesh passed a law in 2016 penalizing marriages under the age of 18 but included a clause that allows girls to be married under special circumstances with consent of the parents and the court, avoiding the consequences that the law put in place. The Bangladeshi law of 2016 actually reduced (instead of increased) the legal minimum age to get married with a combined parental and judicial consent.¹³ The logic behind reducing the legal minimum age was based on the unintended effect of previous interventions leading to higher dowry payments among some of the girls because of their older age when getting married.¹⁴ The 2016 law was highly criticized after its inception with many saying that it would do nothing to change the current state or even make things worse. Another criticism was that the controversy of the bill could have the potential to take policy attention away from actual prevention strategies and negatively impact the work being done to combat child marriage in the country.¹⁵

In 2017, Malawi created legislation to make marriage under the age of 18 illegal with violators being subject to fines. Creating laws to prevent child marriage is not an uncommon practice. However, the way in which these are implemented and enforced varies. One practice that arose in Malawi involved community intervention by child protection committees or local governments to remove a girl from her marital home and return her to her natal home. Some of these practices may be the reason for lower rates in Malawi as they help to actually enforce child marriage laws which is an issue that many countries with high rates of child marriage have.¹⁶

Among other countries, parents in Bangladesh and Malawi are quick to marry off their daughters because they feel there is less of a chance she will be romantically involved or perceived as romantically involved before she can be married.¹⁷ Varia (2016, p. 35) notes that a commonality is that “most girls—economically dependent, with little autonomy or support, and pressured by social norms—feel they had no choice but to comply with their parents’ wishes. Discriminatory gender norms in many places, including traditions that dictate that a girl live with her husband’s family, while a boy remains with and financially supports his parents, contributes to perceptions that daughters are an economic burden while sons are a long-term investment.”

Lee-Rife et al. (2012) detail five approaches to ending child marriages and analyze what works.

- The first approach is “Empowering Girls with Information, Skills, and Support Networks.” The logic behind this approach was that girls who are educated on these topics will be able to more fully advocate for themselves.

¹³ Wodon et al. (2017), p. 3.

¹⁴ Kalamar, Lee-Rife and Hindin (2016), p. S20.

¹⁵ This paragraph is based on Asadullah and Wahhaj (2017).

¹⁶ This paragraph is based on Melnikas et al. (2021).

¹⁷ Varia (2016).

- The second approach is “Educating and Mobilizing Parents and Community Members.” In practice, this would have the benefit of stopping child marriage at what is often its source—the people in charge of marrying off girls.
- The third is “Enhancing the Accessibility and Quality of Formal Schooling for Girls.” As has been seen before, education is a helpful barrier in preventing the practice.
- The fourth approach suggests that “Offering Economic Support and Incentives for Girls and Their Families” as financial incentives are often cited as a reason for early marriages.
- Finally, the fifth approach is “Fostering an Enabling Legal and Policy Framework,” which would try to eradicate child marriage through policy and law.

Though each of these approaches are positive in their own ways, evidence points to a necessity for all of them to work together in order to achieve abolition of child marriage. No one practice has been found to work on its own and many different approaches being used increases the chances of at least one solution being effective in this way.¹⁸

V.2. Potential Ethical Approaches in Bangladesh and Malawi

The presence of child marriage as a practice anywhere means that women are not equal to men. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”¹⁹ Child marriage is a practice that exacerbates inequalities between men and women and, as long as it exists, women are not equal to men “in dignity and rights.” This means that ethical commitments outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are not being met by any country that still allows child marriage and is evident of the fact that these places are not even able to meet the most basic and universally agreed upon global ethical standards.

Two approaches of ethical decision making have potential to yield the best results when looking at solutions to child marriage. The first is the Common-Good Approach. The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics defines this as an approach that “assumes a society comprising individuals whose own good is inextricably linked to the good of the community. Community members are bound by the pursuit of common values and goals.”²⁰ This is important as programs with the goal of ending child marriage require support and respect from the society as a whole and often the reason child marriage continues to happen is because people and communities create the environment for it to proliferate.

The second approach is the Virtue Approach. The Markkula Center defines this as an approach that “assumes that there are certain ideals toward which we should strive, which provide for the full development of our humanity. These ideals are discovered through thoughtful reflection on what kind of people we have the potential to become.”²¹ This is important because societal ideals of fairness and integrity can only be achieved through equality for all people which is obstructed by the presence of child marriage as a common practice.

The Common-Good Approach, as a result of its basis in the pursuit of common values and goals, has potential to encourage people in these societies to work together to end the issue of child

¹⁸ This paragraph is based on Lee-Rife et al. (2012).

¹⁹ United Nations (undated).

²⁰ Velasquez, Andre, Shanks and Meyer (2015), paragraph 11.

²¹ Velasquez, Andre, Shanks and Meyer (2015), paragraph 14.

marriage.²² This would be beneficial because the root of child marriage is the societal values that enable it which are entirely espoused by the community members that believe in them. By utilizing an approach that intends to change the social norms, it would promote greater solidarity within communities and require people to rethink their view of the practice of child marriage in their community.

The Virtue Approach strives to achieve certain ideals that improve society and give every member of it a fair and just life.²³ It notes that virtues are traits that allow people to act in ways that help them to reach their highest moral potential. This approach is also fitting for the issue of child marriage because a society that still allows child marriage is not one that is fair and just for every citizen nor is it one that is reaching its highest potential. Additionally, Velasquez, Andre, Shanks and Meyer (2015, paragraph 18) state that people who have “developed virtues will be naturally disposed to act in ways consistent with moral principles.” This is important as being against child marriage is a moral principle that needs to be developed in societies that still have the practice in order to have people support programs and initiatives that are focused on ending it and promoting rights for girls.

VI. Conclusion

This article explored the practice of child marriage in Bangladesh and Malawi as well as past efforts and potential strategies to combat it. Both countries have improved over the last few decades in terms of development and lessening the amount of child marriages happening. However, both are still ranked some of the worst places in the world for child marriage. One indicator, education for girls, is now significantly better, having girls enrolled in primary school actually outnumbering males. Despite this, the practice of child marriage continues. Data show that the percentage of women who were first married by age 15 has seen a decrease in both places though Bangladesh’s numbers are still significantly higher than Malawi’s. Important statistical indicators in both countries are promising and show that improvements are being made in social and economic areas that help to reduce child marriage.

Fortunately, both Bangladesh and Malawi recognize child marriage as an issue. Past research and analysis have shown that certain laws and policies put in place in both countries have been ineffective. Evidence points to issues with enforcement being the biggest barrier to these laws being successful. There are often easily found loopholes or fairly lenient consequences for people who break these laws. This indicates that the most successful solutions will be those based around mobilizing community members and educating parents about the detrimental effects of child marriages. Malawi has shown promising growth with programs like this while Bangladesh has progress to make in these areas.

However, as the data on child marriages reviewed in this article shows, both countries have work to do in eliminating child marriage. There are many promising solutions and further socio-economic progress in these countries will likely have the added benefit of helping to end this unacceptable practice in the 21st century. As stated by Girls Not Brides: “There is no single solution, actor or sector to end child marriage; we must all work together.”²⁴

²² Velasquez, Andre, Shanks and Meyer (2015).

²³ Velasquez, Andre, Shanks and Meyer (2015).

²⁴ Girls not Brides (undated), second row below header.

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