



**CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION
IN ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE:
EXPLORING CHILD ACTIVISM
IN BANGLADESH**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the generous contributions of children who shared their time and thoughts in interviews and discussions. We are grateful to colleagues and staff members who provided support and guidance throughout the process: Fred Witteveen, Chandan Z. Gomes, Shabira Sultana, Carla Lewis, David Westwood, Rhian Beynon and Carine Le Borgne. We are thankful for the assistance and support given by Kate Shaw, World Vision Public Engagement Communications, who provided useful insights as we produced this report.

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World Vision ensured safe and ethical participation of children when they shared their stories, adhering to World Vision's safeguarding protocols. Names of children and staff have been anonymised and changed and staff roles presented in a simplified way to ensure confidentiality. All photos were taken and are used with informed consent.

COVER PHOTO © World Vision / Juliet Mondol

Nasima is child activist from Bangladesh who mobilises children and community members to end child marriage and to help girls to stay at school.

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FOREWORDS

As I was reading this study, I remembered a bedtime conversation almost 25 years ago with my daughter. That evening we were reading from a small, coloured book - one of the first child-friendly translations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. She was fascinated about the idea that she had 'rights;' I remember her blue eyes shining with excitement. And while she did not fully understand the concept at that time, as she grew up this idea has turned her entire generation, as well as all children born after 1989, into a different type of social actor: ones who are aware of what is just, and stronger in standing up for those whose rights are being infringed upon.

The adoption of the UN CRC thirty years ago changed our world forever. Children's right to participate in issues that affect their lives, however unevenly implemented, produces significant effects. This is clearly presented in this study, which looks at the decisive role children can play in supporting the enforcement of legislation when old practices, poverty or lack of information, continue to dog the lives of their peers.



"I want to remain involved with the Child Forum until our children can enjoy their child and human rights. I want to be a big leader like Barack Obama, and Malala Yousufzai". (Rajkumar, Bangladesh).

As an organisation we embrace children as active agents of change in their communities and countries. We value and work to strengthen children's ability to construct their own lives. Their impact is long-term, both in the lives of the children who are directly affected, as well as in the life of their generation.

"Initially, we neither had any idea about child marriage, nor did we know how to stop child marriage. But later on, we were able to stop 36 child marriages from happening. Everywhere we go, people speak well of us. Due to our work, many children are going to schools. All this is inspiring us to move forward. I feel proud of us." (Aayush, Bangladesh)

This study is the result of a collaborative partnership between World Vision and the University of Edinburgh as part of our efforts to engage with academic institutions to build rigorous evidence of the impact of children's participation in advocacy initiatives. This research shows that children are not only capable of identifying problems, but also of proposing and implementing solutions to the issues that are relevant to them. These findings are in line with a growing body of evidence that suggests a strong relationship between children's participation and positive outcomes for children and society as a whole. The data collected in this research shows that while advocating for their rights, children learn to work cooperatively and engage with other key partners to make a change in their lives.

I am in awe of the children from the Child Forum in Bangladesh, who have made outstanding efforts to build a better life for themselves and many of their peers.

Daniela Buzducea

Partnership Leader, Advocacy and External Engagement
World Vision International

I am delighted to write this foreword, not only because this topic is very important in Bangladesh, but also because I have been part of this movement of children to defend our rights.

My name is Dola, I am 15-years-old. I believe deeply that children can do many things in society if they get space and opportunities. We have the potential, but need support. The Child Forum is a platform to build children's leadership and a space where we get together and share our feelings with our friends.

The Child Forum has become a good place to protect children from bad association and works to ensure children's rights and protection. Together, we raise our voices against child abuse, sexual harassment, school dropout, child labour and child marriage.

As you can read in this report, the Child Forum is working hard to stop child marriage and we have been successful, but there are too many additional things needed to protect girls. The Child Forum carries out different activities such as street drama, cultural shows, campaigns at school, college and university and orientation for caregivers to stop child marriage.



We, as children, engage in actions to end child marriage because we know other children's pain and how much they suffer.

The law in Bangladesh says that children cannot be married off under 18 years of age, but that in special cases, and if parents agree, then they can marry off their children. The Child Forum strongly raised their voice against this law in front of policy-makers. We know when a child gets married under the age of 18, they face many challenges including increased risk of child and mother mortality, school dropout, domestic violence and abuse.

This is why we organised ourselves to take actions, but we believe more people need to engage. Teachers should discuss the bad effects of child marriage in class. At the same time, the Government should include a chapter about child marriage in textbooks. The Government should implement the laws properly. Religious leaders can play an important role to stop child marriage, as they can motivate the people through religious programme. The police should join hands with the Child Forum, NGOs and other community based organization and take initiatives to stop child marriage. Parents should say no to child marriage to ensure happy future of a child, to protect them from early death.

This report shows the power of children and how we work together to create a better and safer world for us. We need to prevent child marriage because children are the present and future leader of their countries. They will lead the world. But we want to have a safe and child friendly environment for every child now, not when we are adults.

Dola

Joint Secretary of National Child Forum, Bangladesh



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989, there has been a growing demand for children's participation in legislation, policies and practices worldwide. However, there have been a consistent range of challenges, including a pervasive concern about children's participation not having an impact on decision-making and being overly controlled by adults and adult systems. Thus, examples of children's participation that do have an impact and are led by children provide potential learning. This research looks at one such example, where children come together to stop child marriage in their local communities.

In many parts of the world, child marriage is still a common practice. It is estimated that 650 million girls and women alive today,¹ and 115 million boys and men,² were married before they turned 18. Child marriage disproportionately affects girls. This is reinforced by social norms and stereotypes that value girls in different ways than boys and perpetuate marital practices that are prejudicial to girls in the belief that marriage will provide security to the girls.³ Bangladesh has one of the highest child marriage rates where 52 percent of the girls are married before the age 18 and 18 percent before the age of 15.⁴

In order to address this issue, children from Child Forums, supported by World Vision Bangladesh, have been advocating to end child marriage and take direct action to stop the child marriages locally. This research project aimed to explore the claims, practices and outcomes of such child activism in Bangladesh. The research engaged with 36 child activists from two local Child Forums, as well as girls who had been at risk of being married, their parents and key community members mobilised by the child activists.

Child marriage is illegal in Bangladesh for girls under the age of 18 and boys under the age of 21, although courts can allow for exceptions in a girl's 'best interests'. Child activists reported stopping 72 child marriages over two years, as a result of their collective actions⁵. The initiatives taken by the children were not sudden and spontaneous occurrences. The research found that long-term engagement in the Child Forums led the children to take such actions -and to do so successfully. The Child Forum members were not at the vanguard of children's participation, unrepresentative of their communities, but rather addressing the needs of their peers and sometimes themselves, who were at risk of child marriage.

The power of information was central to the children's actions in two ways. First, the Child Forum members described their ever-increasing knowledge about the relevant law and negative effects of child marriage, which was pivotal to child activists' persuasive discussions with parents. Second, Child Forum members became expert on how to find the information of a potential bride's age, especially when parents asserted that the girl was old enough to marry when the children were confident that the bride was underage.

Rather than individualist or isolated, the child activism was highly relational: it relied on collective action amongst the Child Forum members and their peer and community networks. Child Forum members cited local law enforcement within the Bangladeshi administrative system as key partners and they reported high levels of confidence in the adults who provided them with assistance. The child activists were willing to act urgently, to move between places and to mobilise officials to accompany them, so as to stop child marriages which local officials found difficult to do.



Child activism was not always easy for the Child Forum members. For instance, they sometimes had problematic encounters with parents of potential child brides. Some of their own families did not want the children to be active on these issues. Within their communities, children reported some initial criticism for acting inappropriately for their age.

Regardless of these challenges, overall, the Child Forum members perceived very positive effects for themselves individually and their communities more generally. They expressed considerable pride in their achievements in improving recognition of children's rights in their communities.

The main recommendations from this study is for child-focused agencies, decision makers, adult professionals and child activists to systematically invest in programmes that recognise children as rights holders and social actors with the capability to engage in actions to end child marriage and contribute to change, to identify and build on key relational networks over time, especially powerful local adults with whom children can engage with and mobilise, and, embed child activism as an integral component within long-term child participation programmes to support children in taking actions on issues that matter to them.





INTRODUCTION

In past few years, the international community has been captivated by the stories of child activists who have stood up for what they believe in and spoken on issues relevant to their lives. One of the most prominent global figures is Malala Yousafzai who, at the age of 15, was shot in the head in her native Pakistan for campaigning for girls' education. She subsequently addressed the United Nations (UN) and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. Greta Thunberg demonstrated outside the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm to raise awareness on climate change; now aged 16, her activism has inspired thousands of children worldwide. Beyond these highly publicised examples, more needs to be known and understood about the many other children actively seeking change for themselves and their communities, mobilising their peers to promote and protect children's human rights.

This report broadly refers to children as young people under the age of 18, following the definition in Article 1 of the UNCRC.

Child activism refers to activities generated by children, who take action on their own initiative to influence change.

Such activism by children is a form of participation. Participation is one of the core principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which has been pivotal in galvanising the rights of children to participate in public life as part of a broader human rights agenda.⁶ Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, the UNCRC supported a new status to children by recognising them as subjects of rights who are entitled to be heard and participate in decision-making processes.⁷ Participation takes different forms, levels and degrees according to particular situations and contexts, but all of these require adults to reconsider their relationships with children and ensure there are spaces for them to participate.⁸ Despite the UNCRC and its widespread ratification, children's rights to participate still face multiple challenges across countries and regions. Such challenges include tokenistic involvement of children, a lack of impact of such involvement on decision-making and the limited sustainability of participation activities.⁹ Of particular interest, then, are examples of children's participation that are successful at meeting some or all of these challenges, making their participation meaningful, effective and sustainable.

This research project sought to learn from one such example – child activism to stop child marriage. Reports from Bangladesh stated that children from World Vision's Child Forums were successfully organising themselves to advocate for ending child marriage and taking direct action to stop child marriages from occurring locally. Their actions prevented a substantial number of child marriages.¹⁰ This research project aimed to explore the claims, practices and outcomes of this child activism in Bangladesh from the perspective of the child activists, potential child brides and community members. The research engaged with 36 child activists from two local Child Forums, as well as girls who had been at risk of being married, their parents and key community members mobilised by the child activists.

This research concludes that the activism was not individualistic but was undertaken in small groups and within a nexus of relational supports. A key enabling factor was the illegality of child marriage. The children's activism required their persistence and a sense of urgency in the activities they undertook, from virtually searching for information online to physically travelling between households, school and local officials' offices. The findings ultimately challenge the field of children's participation to provide children the time and space for mobilisation and actions.

CHILD MARRIAGE: A GLOBAL ISSUE

Child marriage is defined as a formal marriage or an informal union between two people in which one or both parties are younger than 18 years.¹¹ Such marriages are also often called 'early' or 'forced' marriages, although these terms problematically emphasise the potential immaturity of the person getting married and the coercive nature of the act. The term 'child marriage' is preferred, as it aligns with the UNCRC's definition of a child as someone under the age of 18 (Article 1).¹² Child marriage is illegal due to the age of the spouses, irrespective of a child's maturity or the child's agreement. Such an approach has been taken by the international human rights community, in its efforts to stop child marriage.¹³

The UNCRC itself does not mention child marriage but interpretation of its provisions identifies it as a violation of Articles 19 and 24.3. Article 19 requires States Parties to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, including sexual abuse.¹⁴ Article 24.3 requires States Parties 'to take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children'. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child considers child marriage to be one of the traditional practices that negatively impacts on the well-being of children. The Committee urges States Parties to not take any legislative measure that would reduce the minimum age of marriage from 18 and to prosecute violators who authorise marriages of persons below 18 and those who forge official documents to raise the child's age.¹⁵

Furthermore, child marriage has been addressed in several human rights treaties and was included as part of the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) 2030 agenda. Article 16(2) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) states that 'The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage ...'(Article 16(2)). Article 21 of the African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child calls on governments to stop harmful social and cultural practices, such as child marriage, that affect the welfare and dignity of children. The fifth SDG, which aims to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls, contains Target 5.3 requiring the elimination of all harmful practices, including child marriage.¹⁶

An estimated 650 million girls and women alive today,¹⁷ and 115 million boys and men,¹⁸ were married before they turned 18. The regions reporting the highest prevalence of child marriage were sub-Saharan Africa (where four out of 10 young women were married before the age of 18)¹⁹ followed by south Asia (where three out of 10 young women were married before age 18). Currently, the marriage of girls under 18 is legally permitted in 23 countries, and, in 99 countries, state or customary laws allow girls younger than 18 to marry with the consent of their parents or authorities. In 30 countries, girls under 15 years can marry with parental consent.²⁰ In some countries, minimum ages in legislation are undermined by customary and/or religious laws which have lower ages or none at all.²¹ Furthermore, constitutional laws in some countries allow exceptions to the minimum age in family law or other legal codes. While progress has been made, child marriage trends are still far from meeting the SDG's target.²²

RIGHTS DENIED BY CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage undermines a number of children's rights guaranteed by the UNCRC:

- the right to education (Article 28)
- the right to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, including sexual abuse (Article 19) and from all forms of sexual exploitation (Article 34)
- the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24)
- the right to educational and vocational information and guidance (Article 28)
- the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas (Article 13)
- the right to rest and leisure, and to participate freely in cultural life (Article 31)
- the right to not be separated from their parents against their will (Article 9)
- the right to protection against all forms of exploitation affecting any aspect of the child's welfare (Article 36).

The UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children finds that child marriage is a form of violence against children and a violation of Article 19 of the UNCRC.²³ Child marriage disproportionately affects girls. When girls are married, they are more likely to face physical or sexual violence from a partner than women who get married after the age 18.²⁴ Child marriage is rooted in gender inequalities, poverty, insecurity and lower levels of education.²⁵ It is reinforced by social norms and by stereotypes that value girls in different ways than boys and perpetuate marital practices that are prejudicial to girls in the belief that marriage will provide security to the girls.²⁶

Moreover, families may look to child marriage as a strategy for economic survival, reducing the financial burden of having a child to feed or as a supplement to the household income.²⁷ However, in most cases, child marriage places girls at greater risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, in addition to social isolation and lack of freedom to participate in their social networks.²⁸ This marital practice is detrimental to girls' ability to remain in school and develop skills to promote future employability.²⁹ Such evidence has led to the SDG 5.3 target and the global campaign to end child marriage.



THE CASE OF BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 for females and 21 for males. The country has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world with 52 per cent of girls married before the age 18 and 18 per cent of those girls being younger than 15 years of age.

This gap between statutory laws and actual practice is attributed to a number of factors, including poverty, patriarchal tenets, religious traditions, lack of education opportunities, the high value placed on virginity before marriage and social restrictions on girls. Authority of adults over children, and males over females, can establish unequal gender norms making it very difficult for the girls to have the same rights as the boys, as girls are considered a burden for the families. Furthermore, dowry practices mean that marrying a girl when she is younger can reduce the financial pressure on her family, as families need to pay a higher price when girls are married at an older age. This combination of reasons helps explain the high prevalence of child marriage in Bangladesh, despite its illegality.

The National Parliament of Bangladesh repealed the Child Marriage Restraint Act-1929 in 2017 and passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act-2017. The 2017 Act defines child marriage as a marriage where at least one of the parties is below 18 for females or 21 for males. However, a marriage can be allowed, following certain court or other procedures, should it be in the best interest of the underage girl. Civil society organisations and women's rights activists are concerned that this undermines the minimum age protection procedures as this exception can be widely used to allow parents, or other legal guardians, to obtain a court order to marry off their daughters under the 'best interests' argument. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed its concerns about this provision.



CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

The understanding of children as competent social actors and the UNCRC recognition of children as right holders has resulted in more opportunities for children to participate in collective decision-making. Article 12(1) of the UNCRC is as follows:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

The right to express a view freely means that children have the right to express relevant perspectives and experiences in order to influence decision-making. Children should be able to express their views in many different ways without restriction on age or maturity, with their views taken seriously. Article 12 has to be read and interpreted in connection with other participatory rights, including the principles of non-discrimination (Article 2), freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), freedom of association (Article 15), protection of privacy (Article 16) and access to information (Article 17), as well as the UNCRC in its entirety.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child defines children's participation, in their General Comment No. 12, as an:

... ongoing process, which includes information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. ³⁸

This definition moves away from participation being merely about being present at activities, towards children being entitled to participate in decision-making processes on issues that have an impact on their lives.

This research project focuses on the collective participation of children who conducted direct actions to stop child marriages in their communities in Bangladesh. The children are members of local Child Forums, which were established to enhance children's rights and create opportunities for their members to engage in social change. Amongst other issues, Child Forum members decided to campaign to end child marriage. They have mobilised their own constituencies to identify, trace and stop, in a timely and effective manner, child marriages that have been arranged in their communities.

This project deliberately uses the term 'child activism', which is not a phrase commonly found within the children's rights field. The expression draws on literature of youth activism, which assumes that young people self-generate activities rather than being directed by adults. It has similarities with the Latin American concept of child protagonism, which recognises the active role children play in their societies, how they can instigate change, and the renewed interest in active citizenship as emphasising societal participation rather than legal status. Child activism contains a similar recognition of children's very active influence in and on their societies. Given the participation literature's criticism that children's participation activities are too often initiated and structured by adults, children's actions led and undertaken on their own behest are potentially illuminating and challenging.

This mobilisation of children to protect their peers leads to several searching and topical questions, including:

- how children's own participation can be part of the solution to end child victimisation
- what contextual factors aid or hinder their engagement to take actions effectively and successfully
- what are the impacts of such activism on the child activists, the children who would have become brides and community members.

The research discussed here sought to learn from one such example of children's activism – when children conducted activities to take direct action in small groups, to stop a potential child marriage.

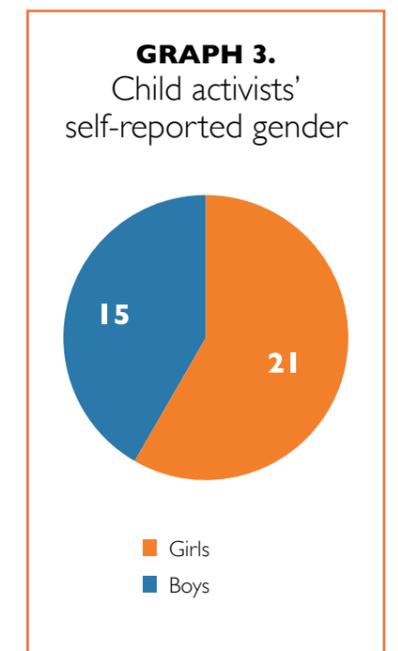
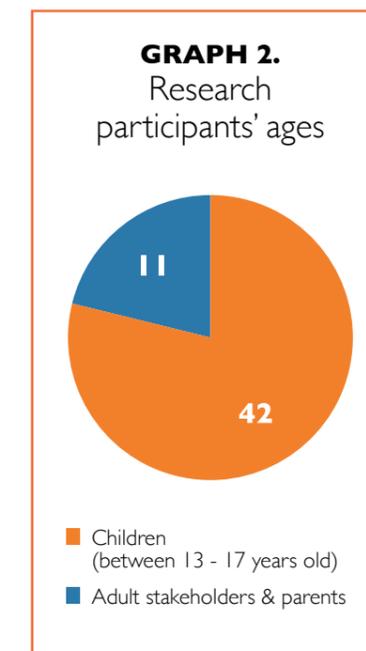
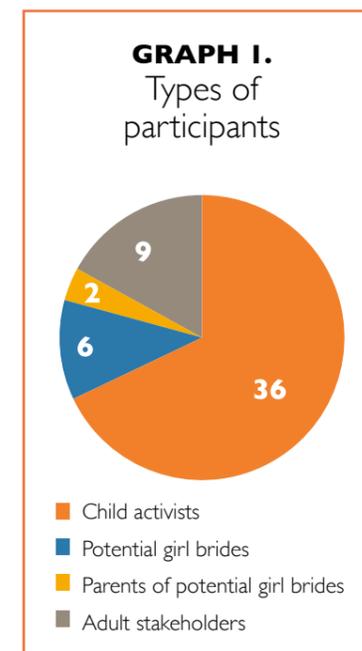


METHODOLOGY

The research project aimed to explore and challenge the claims, practices and outcomes of the work of child activists in Bangladesh from the perspectives of the child activists, (potential) child brides and community members. The project had the following research questions:

- How do children become child activists?
- What are the longitudinal trajectories and impacts of those involved in the activism?
- What were the necessary factors and contexts for the child activism to be successful in stopping child marriage?

The research questions were addressed through a mixed method approach, using quantitative methods to scope the extent of child activism and qualitative methods to address questions that required a depth of exploration and interrogation of causality. This research was conducted in Bangladesh and engaged with the following participants: (a) children who undertook actions to stop child marriages from taking place, (b) child brides whose marriages did not proceed and (c) adult stakeholders from the community. As can be seen in the graphs below, 36 child activists participated, who were between the ages of 13 and 17. Further, six girls whose child marriages had been stopped by the Child Forum's child activism, and two of their parents, were interviewed. Nine adults that were identified as key to children stopping the child activism were interviewed.



This project adopted several methods for data collection, including focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Retrospective examples of child activism were identified through the research and followed up with the key stakeholders involved in order to explore longitudinal impacts and trajectories. As an exploratory study, such qualitative methods facilitate people to share their own meanings, perspectives and views and to be open and to take advantage of findings that were initially unexpected.⁴⁴ In addition, a self-report questionnaire was filled in by each child activist in order to gain individualised information systematically (such as current age and the length of time and extent of involvement in the Child Forum).

The child activists were recruited from two local Child Forums to participate in this research. To answer the research questions, the research team sought sites which had been reportedly active in stopping child marriages recently (i.e. within the last 12 months). Furthermore, an urban and a rural site were sought, in anticipation that distance and transport could be an issue for children's direct actions (although, in fact, this was not a finding from the research).

An urban and a rural local Child Forum were then selected, and child activists recruited from those Forums. This resulted in the 36 child activists participating, 21 of whom identified as girls and 15 of whom identified as boys. The child activists were between the ages of 13 and 17. The child activists usually worked together in groups, and so the researchers used group discussions to collect data. The researchers met with two groups in the rural area and one group in the urban area. After ice-breakers and introductions, the child participants were invited to fill in the self-report questionnaires and then to have in-depth discussions within the group.⁴⁵ Within these discussions, the child participants used large sheets of paper to collectively track the processes of their actions.⁴⁶ The focus group discussions lasted approximately two hours, although the lively contributions of the child participants could well have continued longer, given their enthusiasm.

Subsequently, six girls were interviewed whose child marriages had been stopped by one of the Child Forum's actions. The girls were interviewed within the familiar setting of their Community Centre. The interviews were semi-structured (that is, with a set of questions but allowing for unanticipated issues to be explored in the interview as well). Individual interviews were proposed to the potential participants, to facilitate an in-depth exchange on a potentially sensitive issue.⁴⁷ Four girls were interviewed individually while another two girls were interviewed together at their request.

From both the focus groups discussions and interviews, adults with key roles in the children's actions were identified, and the research team sought to interview them. Nine adults were interviewed who had mandated roles in their communities to stop child marriages. These included: five Upazila (sub-district) Nirbahi Officers (UNOs), mid-level civil service officers; the chief executive of an upazila; and a Women Development Officer of an upazila; the chairman of a union parishad (rural council – the smallest unit of local government); and two local police officers. Interviews were also held with two parents whose daughters' marriages were stopped. While these parents' views were illuminating, the number of parents interviewed was lower than originally anticipated; other methods would likely be required to access these potentially sensitive participants.

This research project gained approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. The project sought to anticipate and address ethical issues, manage risks associated with the research and ensure that the highest standards were in place at all phases of the research, from design to dissemination. This study followed ethical research guidelines to ensure the safety, rights, dignity and well-being of both the children and adult participants.⁴⁸ The participants provided consent, and the research team sought to ensure that their participation was voluntary and informed. Participants' personal information, such as family names and contact details, was removed from the notes, and they were identified only by their gender and age.⁴⁹ The names used in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity. Additionally, the study included an analysis of the contexts in which the research was conducted in order to identify potentially harmful situations and develop an action plan to address any circumstances that could be uncomfortable for participants. Children and adults were interviewed in their local language in order to minimise misinterpretations, and translations were provided. The means by which the research recruited participants resulted in potential biases in the findings, which should be taken into account. The child activists chose to participate in the research, so this research did not involve

children who had 'dropped out' of child activism or did not want to participate in the research. Similarly, the girls who were at risk of getting married and their parents were more likely to be positive that the marriages had been stopped. No families where the Child Forum's action was unsuccessful in preventing the marriage were available or interested in participating. Alternative methods would be required to address these limitations and to recruit a broader range of families. Despite these limitations, the research provides rich findings to answer the research questions and an agenda for future research.

The self-report questionnaire provided quantitative data, which were analysed descriptively about the ages of children, for example, and the extent and length of their involvement in child actions and the Forum. The other data from the groups and interviews were primarily analysed thematically, which involved identifying patterns or themes within the qualitative data. Using this approach, the data were systematically organised and examined into themes, categories and codes, in order to answer the research questions.⁵⁰ The analysis looked across the data, but also by participant types and where respondents were connected (e.g. a girl whose marriage had been stopped and her parents). The visualisations were considered on their own and together with the extensive discussions during the interviews or focus groups as they were created. When quotations are provided, they are typical of the data found according to the participant's type, unless otherwise stated.





FINDINGS

The 36 Child Forum members interviewed in Bangladesh reported stopping 72 child marriages in two years as a result of their collective actions. The Child Forum members mobilised themselves and adults in power to take direct measures to end child marriage. They did so in a context where the practice of child marriage continues to be widespread, despite its illegality and the considerable efforts of civil society and government officials to raise awareness of the unlawfulness of these marriages.

THE JOURNEY TO CHILD ACTIONS

According to the Child Forum members, their journey began when they joined their local Child Forum. They described becoming children's rights activists and working together for a cause; specifically, their right to be protected from child marriage. This was not done individually or in isolation but was achieved by networking with and influencing adult partners to support and join the Child Forum's collective actions to stop child marriage.

In Figure 1, the poster captures several of the key steps taken by the child activists, which were common across the focus groups. The poster was composed within a group discussion, by the child participants.

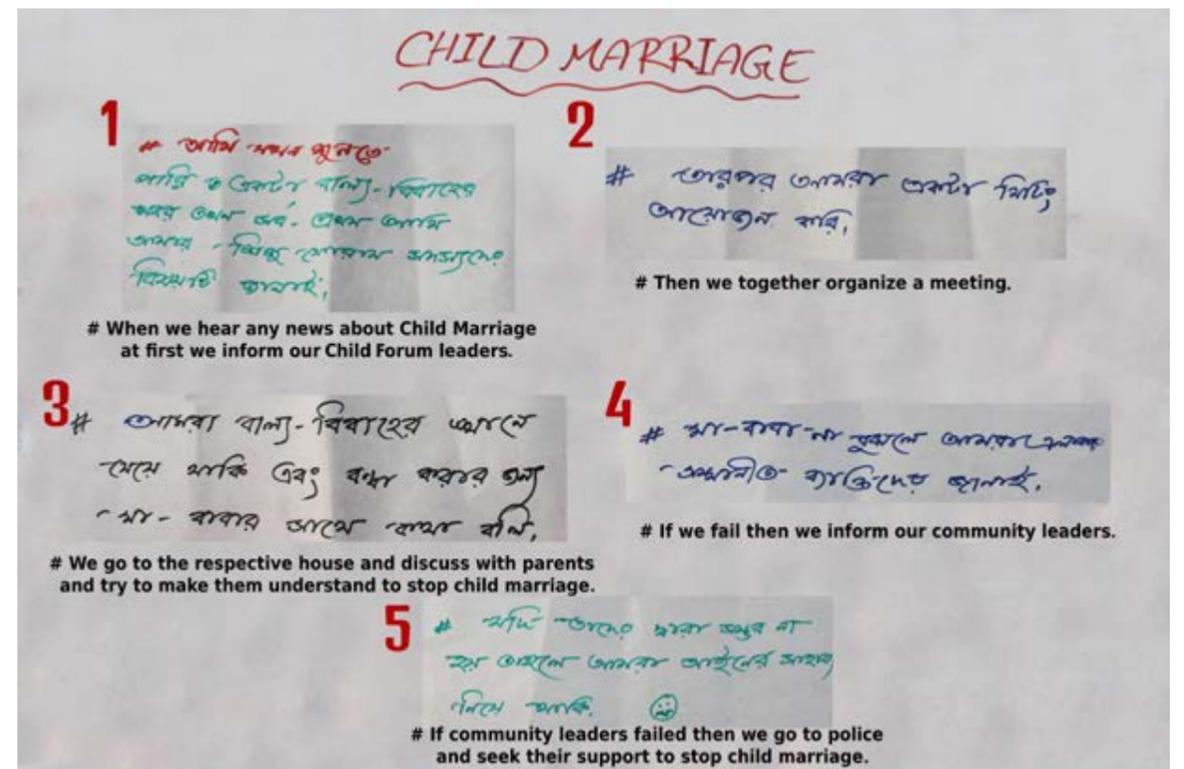


Figure 1. Poster by Child Forum members laying out the steps they used to prevent child marriage in their community. English translations were inserted by the researchers later.

The poster captures several of the key steps of the child activists' action, which were repeated across the group discussions:

First, a potential child marriage was identified by those who were willing to act. Child Forum members frequently identified potential brides because they noticed the girl was missing from school, a friend of the girl expressed concerns, or a Child Forum member herself was at risk and reached out to other Forum members for help. Upon learning this information, the Child Forum members would report their suspicions to the Child Forum's support staff and other Forum members.

Second, the Child Forum members would meet to discuss, deliberate and develop a strategy. Then a smaller group, typically between three to five child activists, would take action. The smaller group would be composed of girls and/or boys. In addition, the girls were sometimes accompanied by boy members so that the girls would be safe and culturally acceptable while undertaking the planned actions.

Third, the small group of Child Forum members would engage directly with the father or both parents of the potential girl bride, frequently travelling to the family home. The Child Forum members would provide them with information about the harms of child marriage to try and persuade them not to proceed. They would sometimes request the girl's birth certificate, in order to ascertain the girl's accurate age.

Often these visits were unsuccessful, particularly before the Child Forum was well known. In steps four and five, Child Forum members would mobilise community leaders to intervene with the parents. They would often go to the UNO and police to seek support. Frequently, the Child Forum members would conduct additional investigations to track down other official records showing the girl's age, to provide the UNOs and police with the evidence they needed. The child activists would ask an UNO or police official to return with them to the family's home to speak to the father again; at which point the father may be more likely to agree to stop the child marriage. The girl would shortly return to school and, as far as is known, remain unmarried.

Underlying this process were key elements that made it possible. These three elements are explored below: the emergence of child activism from children's participation, the power of information and the collective and networked nature of child activism.

THE EMERGENCE OF CHILD ACTIVISM

While the celebration of the children's actions in the press suggested their sudden and spontaneous emergence, the research pointed to a critical history that led the children to take such actions and to do so successfully.

Many of the Child Forum members had been a part of their Child Forum for some time; only one member reported just one year of participation, while the rest had been involved between two to four years or longer. They had originally joined because they wanted to make a difference in their lives and the lives of other children. For example, Rajkumar, a Child Forum member, noted:

I want to know about child rights, I want to develop my leadership skills. I am also a child, and I want to prevent cruelty for the children of our country. I want to protect their human rights and children's rights.

They remained involved because of their passion for justice and children's rights. Friya, a Child Forum member, reported:

... I want to remain involved with the Child Forum until our children can enjoy their child and human rights'.

The Child Forum members thus tied their initial and ongoing motivations to improving children's rights.

The Forums had been engaged in sequential participatory activities, such as a recent investigation on birth certificates. As many children do not have official birth certificates and thus no official record of their ages, the Child Forum members found that it was difficult to protect children from child labour or marriage. Thus, they campaigned for change, engaging with key local decision makers. Following on from this investigation, the local Child Forums wanted to address child marriage further, as it was an issue for themselves, their peers and their communities. They were encouraged in this effort by World Vision Bangladesh.

The Child Forums provided a vehicle for members to learn about the law on child marriage, the extent of child marriage, and its effects on those married and their families. Child Forum members reported attending training on the topic and subsequently engaging in local community campaigns to share this information more widely.

These activities had personal as well as community impacts. One Child Forum member, Aayush, explained how she and her brother used knowledge gained through the Child Forum:

I tried to convince my mother [that I should not get married] by saying that I am only 15; if I marry, I will suffer from physical problems [and] after the marriage my freedom will vanish. My freedom will be curtailed, and I will not be able to move freely or be able to do whatever I want to do. She was convinced a bit at that. But my brother did the main thing. He explained to my mother more elaborately that I was only 15, and this is not a marriageable age.

The fieldwork showed that Child Forum members were activists protecting other children from child marriage, but, at the same time, many of them were at risk of being married themselves. Out of the 36 child participants in this study, five girls self-reported that their marriages had been arranged by their parents. These potential brides informed their friends, other Child Forum members, and their networks to get assistance and mobilise others to help prevent their marriages from happening.

As knowledge of their actions became more widespread, other children would approach the Child Forum members to inform them of impending marriages (either on their own behalf or others). Child Forum members attributed this growing interest to the awareness-raising activities they carried out in the community and the protective role they were seen to be taking with girls in the community. As their activism continued, the Child Forum members developed more sophisticated skills to convince the families not to marry off their daughters.

It was from this background that individual and groups of Child Forum members acted. There was a history amongst many of the Child Forum members, they developed knowledge and skills through investigations and other participatory activities, and had received training.⁵¹ Child marriage was not an abstract concern to the Child Forum members; it was their peers and sometimes themselves who were at risk of child marriage. Their actions drew on this history and, as is further documented below, this was significant to the success of their actions.

THE POWER OF INFORMATION

Information was central to the child activism in two ways.

First, the Child Forum members described their ever-increasing knowledge about child marriage, built from information provided in Child Forum training sessions and their engagement with families. Their actions were based on the conviction that child marriage was wrong, a form of violence against children and should not happen. When the Child Forum members spoke to a parent, they felt confident sharing their knowledge of Bangladeshi law as well as the research evidence about the harmful effects of child marriage for those married, any future children and the family as a whole. For example, Aayush, a Child Forum member, was particularly definitive about what she tells parents:

I first tell them that marrying off a girl or a boy before 18 years of age is a crime. Then, I tell them about the health hazards an early marriage entails. Then, I tell them that child marriage puts an end to the freedom of the bride especially.

As demonstrated by Aayush, the Child Forum members proudly reported their confidence in their evidence and knowledge of the law. Furthermore, Child Forum members reported learning more about the underlying causes of child marriage. For example, Shrivali explained how girls are perceived should they start having a relationship with a boy:

Most parents marry off their daughters when they find that their daughter has developed a relationship with a boy. They start thinking that their daughter is no longer a minor, so they need to marry her off. Whenever we visit and talk to such families, they argue that if they stop her marriage, as per our request, then who will take the risk if she elopes with a boy later.

The Child Forum members learnt that they needed to address parental fears and concerns about the reputational risks and other hazards of childhood relationships. Like many of the other Child Forum members, Bansari talks about the complexities underlying child marriage:

I have learnt many things from our family visits. Each family has its own unique problems, and, due to these problems, child marriage takes place. Some families are poor [and] some have fears that their daughter or son will run away with a boy or a girl. [Based on] these fears, they marry off their daughters or sons. Some families do not have education, and they are not aware of the bad effects of child marriage. They argue that their daughters or sons have grown up. So, [they] arrange marriage for them. Another thing is that sometimes both the boy and the girl consent to the marriage.

Through such interactions, the Child Forum members became increasingly confident in their knowledge about the underlying causes of child marriage and its negative effects, and they described being able to express this persuasively to parents. One parent confirmed this in her interview:

When Child Forum members came, I liked their advice because their words were nice and real, but we are victims of the situation. Our daughter is eve teased⁵² on the way to her school; that is why we wanted her to get married as soon as possible [so we can] save her from the bad boys. At first Jibon [a Child Forum member] came to [talk to] us about stopping the marriage of our daughter; then five or six other Child Forum members came to us to stop the marriage of our daughter ... After talking with the Child Forum leaders, we sat together with our family and discussed the issue. We decided as a family that we will not arrange the marriage. Our daughter started to go to school again.

Thus, being able to share facts about child marriage was central to the child activists' ability to persuade parents. The Child Forum members gained this knowledge formally, and it was enhanced as Child Forum members learnt from their family visits.

Second, Child Forum members reported becoming experts on how to find information to determine a potential bride's age. The child participants provided many examples of parents asserting that their daughter was of marriageable age when the children were confident that the bride was actually underage.⁵³ Chandrima, one of the Child Forum members, reported one such example:

The family showed us 'proof' that the girl was not a minor. According to her birth certificate, she was 18. But we knew for sure that this was not the case. She was in grade 9 when the marriage was about to take place and her registration card for her grade 8 examination contained her age and year of birth. As she was in our school, we knew this information.

This example matches other research that shows that, if a girl were not officially registered at birth, then her age can be unreliably recorded at a later date, thus possibly leading to her being married as a child.⁵⁴

As Child Forum members were aware of potential contestations about a girl's age, they took the initiative to investigate whether the documentation they were being shown was legitimate. When visiting a family, Child Forum members would often ask the parents to see the potential child bride's birth certificate. Some parents agreed to show it; others declined. When children had doubts about the certificate's legitimacy, they sought out the original certificate or used other information sources. One Child Forum member, Padma, described their approach:

Then we want to get the birth certificate of the child. We compare it [other documentation], to check whether it is correct or not. How do we do it? We collect the junior school certificate [to check for] the age. Also, we collect the primary school certificate, her birth certificate and compare them. You can easily find out whether the birth certificate is wrong or right. Sometimes, you know, parents go to the upazila council and take a false certificate. That is why we verify the birth certificate to try to understand whether it is a child marriage or not.

One of the local law enforcement officers interviewed as part of the research project confirmed the importance of this information about a girl's age. He pointed out that age verification is a bureaucratic process that is difficult for officials to carry out within the limited time before a marriage is to take place. Thus, the prompt actions of the child activists, to corroborate the children's ages, were vital to stopping marriages.

Information was central to the child activism and particularly its success. Knowledge about the law and research evidence on the effects of child marriage was a central resource for the Child Forum members. This grew in complexity as they undertook child actions. The Child Forum members became skilled at locating additional information to confirm a child's age that could be submitted as persuasive administrative evidence to confirm the illegality of the proposed marriage.



RELATIONSHIPS: NETWORKING AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

The child actions were highly relational; they relied on collective action amongst the Child Forum members and their peer and community networks. This networking was significant in the actions' success in stopping child marriages.

Child Forum members were aware of their potential as child activists to address something unfair but they recognised their advocacy was limited as children in an adult-dominated society, where their participation could be restricted due to age-based traditional roles. For example, Rakhi, a Child Forum member, noted that originally they had little support from the community, 'Initially, no one used to support our bid to stop child marriage; rather, people used to raise questions as to why we were [involving ourselves in] those things'. However, this did not deter them from taking action, as Achita, a Child Forum member, reported, 'Since it was not possible to accomplish the task on our own; we sought assistance from other organisations'. The Child Forum members reached out to their networks of key powerful adults.

Most commonly, Child Forum members cited receiving the assistance of local law enforcement within the Bangladeshi administrative system, including UNOs, police officers, the chairman of the Union Council, the sub-district's Women Affairs Officer and other representatives from the local government. Furthermore, Child Forum members identified schoolteachers, school principals and journalists as potentially important partners to mobilise when they identified a potential child marriage. For example, Vikram, a Child Forum member, stated:

The local administration, UNO and police all gave us [as members of the Child Forum] permission to go to them in case we needed assistance in stopping a child marriage. They were ready to extend their support whenever we needed.

As demonstrated by the journey above, such support was frequently essential to stopping a child marriage from taking place. Often a local official would accompany the Child Forum members to the family home to dissuade the parents from moving forward with the marriage. The local official, as a representative of the state, was able to underline the illegality of the marriage with an explicit or implicit threat of arrest should the parents disregard the advice. Charandas, a Child Forum member, narrated one such incident:

The police and the UNO tried to convince the parents to stop this marriage, but the family was not in a mood to listen to them. Then the police threatened them that, if they do not listen to them, then they would be arrested. The family came to terms at that time and realised their mistake. They stopped the marriage.

While no actual arrests nor court cases were reported in the research, the threat of them was considered highly persuasive by the Child Forum members.

The Child Forum members developed working relationships with UNOs and police officers and met them to discuss potential cases of child marriage and share ideas and strategies. These relationships grew in strength over the time, to the point that the Child Forum members felt they could call on local leaders successfully and quickly. As Chumi, a Child Forum member, proudly explained:

On earlier occasions, when we used to go to the UNO's office seeking any assistance ... the UNO used to keep us waiting. But now, whenever we have any information about a child marriage or child repression, he responds to even just a call from us [and] acts promptly. And if we go to his office now, he will talk to us even if he is very busy.

This partnership between the child activists and adults in power resonates with other childhood literature that has extensively studied the role adults can play in supporting children's participation.⁵⁵ Adult support is often critical to supporting children to participate and, in particular, to have an impact on decisions.

The Child Forum members' role in detecting cases of child marriage and mobilising strategic actors to stop them, was particularly important as local law enforcement officers found it difficult to do so themselves. Millions of people may live in an upazila (sub-district) but often an upazila has few officials to carry out these types of tasks. The expansive geography, inaccessibility of many locations and large populations hinder UNOs' ability to respond to reports of impending child marriages, according to adult respondents. One UNO described these difficulties when outlining his attempts to stop child marriages:

Normally, we find that four or five child marriages take place here [in this upazila]. Once I received news in the morning that a child marriage was going to happen. I informed the police station and headed off to the village to stop it. Night fell by the time we arrived there ... as it was about 40 or 45 kilometres away [and] took more than two and a half hours to get to the village due to bad weather. It was dark when we arrived there. There was no power supply, and the country road was muddy and slippery. [Then] people left the scene. We realised and understood that they were nearby, but we could not do anything.

Another local law enforcement officer confirmed these challenges and explained how they also tried to mobilise networks:

We have some plans, but it is very tough to keep our commitments because, I have more than 400 square kilometres under my jurisdiction. It is very tough to go to every side and take [care of] every responsibility. For this reason, we are encouraging community development and alertness and motivating the local people. We are trying to build up this kind of bridge with lots of people.

These two accounts illustrate the challenges officials faced as well as the opportunities for Child Forum members. The children played a pivotal role in identifying when a marriage of a girl had been arranged, earlier than local officials.

Beyond local officials, the Child Forum members and potential child brides called on their networks of peers, family members and other community leaders to help them stop a child marriage. The Child Forum members reported drawing on their collective decision-making in initial strategy meetings. They acted together and went in small groups to the families' homes or the local official. Girls reported they felt more comfortable acting in a group, which also ensured that their presence in more public spaces was considered respectable and safe. Furthermore, they gained collective strength by acting together. The strong peer networks formed through the Child Forum members were key resources for their actions to be organised and performed.



THE LONGER-TERM EFFECTS OF CHILD ACTIVISM

All participants, adults and children, were asked to reflect on the negative and positive effects of the children's actions to stop child marriage, on the child activists personally and their communities.

Not all child marriages were stopped by the children's actions. The research specifically asked about such examples, from all participants.⁵⁶ A few reports were given of parents moving out of the local area, so that the child marriage could still take place. For those girls whose marriages had been stopped, the evidence of the negative effects of child marriage and its illegality had been convincing. Furthermore, parents were often persuaded that the girl's potential success in school would be beneficial for both her and her family. Thus, while not all actions were successful, the combined persuasion of negative repercussions and positive potential of education helped stop some child marriages.

While research participants were overwhelmingly positive about the child activism, three negative effects were reported. First, Child Forum members reported several upsetting instances of difficult encounters with parents of potential child brides, leaving some Child Forum members feeling threatened by the fall out of these interactions in the longer term. Secondly, several children said that their involvement with the Child Forum's advocacy efforts was, at least initially, problematic for their families who did not want their children to be active in this way. For example, Rajkumar, a Child Forum Member, recounted the difficulties he faced when he intervened in a potential child marriage that involved his maternal family:

Later on, when everybody knew about [my involvement advocating against child marriage and the Child Forum], both my family and my uncle's family created a lot of pressure on me. But later, with the advice from my mother, I tried to explain the matter to them. My mother inspired me in this regard. She extended her cooperation.

Rarely did the Child Forum members suggest that their families were proud of their activism to stop child marriage, although their families had typically come to accept it. Third, Child Forum members reported, at least initially, difficulties that they faced within their communities, where they were stigmatised for acting inappropriately for their age. Activism, therefore, could make children feel vulnerable, although no reports were given of any physical threats being carried out against any of the Child Forum members. While negative reports were in the minority, they do point to the need to support children and address such family and community views.

The Child Forum members, however, were consistently and strongly positive about their activism to stop child marriage.⁵⁷ They were unanimous about the positive impacts for themselves, as Chanda (a Child Forum member) exemplified in her comment:

After preventing a child marriage, we take pride in ourselves. When others praise us for our work, we feel special. We feel that we have done something good for the society and that the society understands our worth.

The impact of participatory projects on the personal lives of children has been extensively researched; findings identify multiple positive benefits for the participants, such as an increase in confidence, a sense of belonging and feeling of social worth.⁵⁸ Such findings match this research.

The Child Forum members were equally unanimous in their pride in improving their communities. For example, Gaurika, a Child Forum member, explained:

We feel proud that we could stop some child marriages. Now we can assist our classmates, and we feel proud for this good initiative. Community people now respect us ... For our good work, the attitude of our family members has changed, and due to this, we are now able to pursue our studies. Community people acknowledge our legitimate rights.

As suggested by Gaurika, one contribution was raising awareness of children's rights within their families and communities. Another Child Forum member, Bandhula, explained this very directly:

Our feeling is that we are children. We have rights, but many families deny these rights. Being involved with the Child Forum has enabled us to implement these rights properly.

The Child Forum members perceived that their collective contributions changed their communities for the better, particularly in terms of encouraging families and communities to recognise children's rights.

Such positivity was largely echoed by other participants, albeit with slightly different perspectives. For example, one UNO was positive about the children contacting him about potential child marriages in particular and their activism more generally. The UNO thought that this type of activism was positive for the children for their role as citizens, as it taught them about the problems resulting from child marriage. Adults were more likely to recognise the children's activism as making them better citizens in the future, while child participants were proud of their activism in the present, as they perceived their actions as a major contribution to their communities today.

Overall, research participants perceived the children's activism as having positive effects for the child activists individually and their communities more generally. The Child Forum members expressed considerable pride in their achievements in improving recognition of children's rights in their communities. The child activism, however, was not without ill effects, as the children needed to deal with negative emotions when going to families' homes as well as their own familial and community discomfort with the children acting 'out of place' based on intergenerational hierarchies.



CONCLUSION

This research set out to learn from child actions to stop child marriage, as a form of child activism that seemed to address many of the challenges of children's participation more generally. The children's activism was having an immediate impact on issues that mattered to children: child marriages were being stopped. The research findings were illuminating, in both the continuities with the more general participation literature and the unexpected findings.

The child actions were dramatic and fast, with children successfully intervening to stop child marriages in days. But these were not spontaneous mobilisations of unconnected children. These actions arose from previous collective participation, were supported by the local Child Forums organised by World Vision Bangladesh and involved children who were already campaigning for birth certificate registration and knowledgeable on the issue of child marriage. This background provided key resources for the child activists:

- knowledge of persuasive evidence on the law and the negative effects of child marriage
- firm connections between Child Forum members – the collective strength helped them plan actions and act cooperatively in small groups
- networks between child activists and local officials – these were cultivated over time so that child activists could call on local officials for support in short time-frames to stop a child marriage.⁵⁹

While this research cannot comment on child activism that lacks such a history,⁶⁰ it can identify the significant role that these components played and suggest they were important not only for children to decide to take such actions – but very frequently and increasingly to be successful in doing so. Research on social activism for adults⁶¹ similarly finds that leading adult activists rely on networks for their activism to be successful. Investment in participatory activities over time, and sharing of political and social capital between adults and children, can provide a sound foundation for children to take actions themselves.

Children's activism was not invariably seen as positive by their families or communities, but the children were able to undertake it. Children who participated in the research were consistently positive about what they had gained personally from their actions and proud of what they had done for other children and their communities. Other local leaders were similarly impressed, seeing the children's action as helping them to develop into future educated citizens. They seemed to miss, however, that the child activists were frequently addressing the risk of being married themselves, or their close friends or relatives. The child activists were not necessarily of higher socio-economic status, but rather of similar status to others in their communities, and their activism was motivated and undertaken because of their immediate positions in relation to child marriage. They were taking action to address an immediate risk for themselves or their close peers.

A striking finding from the research was the urgent activity of the actions. The time between learning about a potential child marriage and it taking place was often very short – usually a matter of days or, at most, a month. The child activists were willing and able to move very fast in terms of planning and enacting an intervention, locating age information and mobilising their networks. It was also about moving fast physically, with child activists going between places – from the potential bride's family home, to visit and pick up the local official, to go to the head teacher – in the short amounts of time available. It was this ability and willingness to be so active, to ensure information and people were brought together when local officials found the task overwhelming, which led to marriages being stopped. While families may not have been particularly appreciative of their children's activism, no concerns were reported that the children were shirking their education nor other commitments. Children's activism was based on their ability and willingness to be active.

Another resource that supported the children's successful activism was the illegality of child marriage. While this research cannot know what would happen if the law were not in place, it can demonstrate that the law was an effective resource for the Child Forum members to draw upon in their actions. It was a persuasive argument when the Child Forum members spoke to a parent of a potential girl bride. It gave the Child Forum members a reason to call on their network of local officials to intervene. If the parents were not persuaded by the evidence presented by the child activists, the officials could threaten legal intervention. No legal actions – arrests or court cases – were taken against any of the parents approached as part of the Child Forum members' activism efforts. But the law had an important place in the actions being successful, not only in changing social norms, but in allowing for the mobilisation to take place.

The research illuminates how the children's activism to stop child marriage was a particularly powerful form of children's participation. It was powerful in terms of its immediate successes in stopping a child marriage, which might otherwise have happened. It was powerful in terms of the learning and pride child activists had in their actions, and in the perceived changes they had made in their communities. Such activism was made possible – and almost certainly led to it often being successful – by underlying and ongoing foundations, in the form of a history of participatory activities, the sharing of information on child marriage, and building networks with local leaders and officials. The child actions were very fast and active, but they were also successful because they could draw on such resources.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Child-focused agencies, decision makers, adult professionals and child activists should:

- invest in programmes that recognise children as rights holders and social actors with the capability to engage in actions to end child marriage and contribute to change
- empower children with information, skills, tools and technical support to enable them to participate in advocacy efforts that influence decision makers and stakeholders to end child marriage
- equip staff members with the knowledge and skills to support child activism and partner with children in a sensitive, appropriate and empowering manner
- educate parents, community members and local stakeholders on the value of supporting children in their activism and joining their movements to end child marriage
- identify and build on key relational networks over time, especially powerful local adults with whom children can engage with and mobilise.
- involve children in the development of creative and innovative methodologies to sustain and scale up programmes and strategies to enhance their engagement in social change
- ensure that children are aware of the necessary safeguarding and ethical considerations that must be undertaken both for themselves and their actions
- provide child-sensitive accountability mechanisms for the children engaging in activism to contribute feedback and then respond to their insights
- embed child activism as an integral component within long-term child participation programmes to support children in taking actions on issues that matter to them
- fund and conduct in-depth research on the processes utilised and resulting outcomes of child activism efforts to end child marriage, regionally and nationally, in order to develop a greater understanding of children's potential contributions.

ENDNOTES

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