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The Plymouth Institute of Education Online Journal - Volume 1 - 2020The Plymouth Institute of Education Online Journal - Volume 1, No. 1 - 2020

2020

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Durston, Zoe (2020). Childhood and Well-Being in Bangladesh: A Focus on Gender Inequalities, Child Marriage and Climate Change, The Plymouth Institute of Education Online Journal, 1 (1).
Issues,

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/16086>

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Childhood and Well-Being in Bangladesh: A Focus on Gender Inequalities, Child Marriage and Climate Change Issues

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Abstract

This paper uses literature to explore the gender inequalities, the issues of child marriage, and the struggles being faced as a result of climate change in Bangladesh. It highlights the key issues of each topic, and how these issues are linked; and examines how they are being exacerbated by climate change. The paper then focuses on the work that is being done by Non-Governmental Organisations in order to address the Sustainable Development Goals, and highlights what work still needs to be done. It is concluded that education is key to making progress in terms of gender equality, reducing rates of child marriage, and reducing the impact of climate change.

Key Words: Gender, Climate change, Bangladesh, Child marriage, Impacts

Introduction

Alston (2015:2) states that 'climate change is one of the global community's most pressing challenges' and is therefore having social and economic impacts on countries across the globe, especially within some of the world's developing countries. One of these developing countries, and the focus of this paper, is Bangladesh, which is ranked 136 on the Human Development Index (HDI, 2018). Due to the fact that 90% of Bangladesh is flat and mostly less than 9m above sea level (Alam and Ahmed, 2009), it makes it 'one of the most vulnerable countries to sea level rises in the World and [it] is experiencing major challenges due to climate change' (Alston *et al.*, 2014:139), and therefore will be the primary focus of this paper. Climate change is defined as 'any change in climate over time, whether due to natural variability or as a result of human activity' (UNFCCC, 2011:1). It is expressed by Boyd (2014:342) that 'climate change stands to exacerbate existing interlinked problems of social inequality'. In Bangladesh, gender inequalities are being exacerbated by climate change, in particular the gender

imbalances in schools and the number of young girls that are being subjected to child marriage. Child marriage is defined as 'marriage under the age of 18 [and] it applies to both boys and girls, but the practice is far more common among young girls' (UN, 2013), and therefore has a large impact on the number of young girls that attend school. This paper will briefly examine the gender inequalities in Bangladesh, before focusing on child marriage, and will then explore the impact that climate change is having on these already prevalent issues. It will then outline the action that is being taken by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in order to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to help the girls and young women that are disproportionately impacted by these issues.

Gender inequalities in Bangladesh

Gender inequalities are everywhere in our society, and this is no exception for developing countries. For example, Bangladesh is 'one of the few countries in the world where men live longer than women, and where the male population outnumbers the female' (Asian Development Bank 2001, cited in Cannon 2002:48). A reason for this is that it is very common in many South Asian countries to have a culture of son preference (Kishwar, 2014), which has been linked 'to preferential treatment of boys in diet and provision of health care' (Chowdhury and Bairagi, 1990:750). Another reason for son preference is that 'girls can be viewed as a financial burden on families, due to both the dowry and their assumed or actual inability to bring income to the family' (Raj, 2010). In order to help change this view, girls need to have the same level of access to education as their male peers. It was reported by UNICEF (2002) that there are approximately 120 million children globally not in school, and the majority of these are girls. In developing countries culture, ethnicity, religion and race all play a part in the negative social stigma of educating girls (Shafiq, 2009). Denying girls access to education is a barrier to the development of the country, however an educational gender gap will continue to persist if it is more beneficial to invest in boys' education over girls' education (*ibid.*). However, it is believed by Schuler *et al.* (2006) that educated women can earn more, and therefore this view provides some support for delayed marriage (cited in Alston *et al.*, 2014). It is argued by Tuwor and Sossou (2008) that gender inequalities in schools are due to the socio-cultural practices of child marriage, poverty, child slavery, and a lack of economic and social opportunities. This paper has chosen to focus on child marriage due to its high prevalence in Bangladesh, and the impact this has on gender inequalities within schools and the wider impact it has on young girls.

Child marriage in Bangladesh

With regards to child marriage, Bangladesh has one of the highest rates in the World (UNICEF, 2019); the legal age of marriage is 18. However, a study by Godha, Hotchkiss and Gage (2013) conducted on women aged 25-49, found that the median age at first marriage is 15. In a study by Raj (2010), it was found that 15% of the total sample had a husband who was 10 or more years older than themselves, showing how child marriage is more common among young girls and how they are sometimes forced to marry a man much older than themselves. It is stated by Raj (*ibid.*) that the primary factor for the increased risk of girl child marriage is due to lower access to education for girls relative to boys. There are economic risks associated with the continuance of education for girls (Schuler *et al.*, 2006, cited in Alston *et al.*, 2014), and therefore it is one of the reasons that parents withdraw their daughters from school and subject them to child marriage. In a study conducted by Alston *et al.* (2014), it was found that 58 respondents admitted to taking their child out of school for marriage, and 53% of these children were aged 12 or 13; This indicates just how common it is for parents to withdraw their children from education in order to subject them to child marriage, and highlights just how young some of these children are. It is also believed by many parents that it will benefit their children financially and socially and relieve the financial burdens on the family if their daughters marry while still a child (UNICEF, 2005). It was reported by Caldwell *et al.* (1983) that there is an increase in the cost of dowries for older brides and therefore parents are reluctant to wait until their daughters are older for marriage (cited in Kamal *et al.*, 2015),

which is one of the main reasons for girls being withdrawn from school to marry. Dowry payments are illegal but are very common and are where 'goods and money are transferred from the bride's family to the groom's' (Alston *et al.*, 2014:137). The dowry payments are often cheaper for younger girls due to them being considered more physically attractive, wanting to avoid the risk of girls participating in premarital sex, and the belief that younger girls are more compliant (*ibid.*). It is for all of these reasons that child marriage has a larger impact on young girls and highlights some of the reasons for the gender gap within schools in Bangladesh.

Climate change in Bangladesh

As introduced previously, 'Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries with respect to the impacts of climate change' (Alam and Ahmed, 2009); it is subjected to 'floods, flash floods, droughts, saltwater intrusion, cyclones and storm surges' (Alston, 2015:21). It is reported that 'floods occur almost every year in Bangladesh... causing significant damage to crops and properties' (Alam and Ahmed, 2009), and the tropical cyclones that hit Bangladesh are responsible for 49% of the World's total fatalities caused by cyclones (Wasimi, 2009). It is reported that 'over the last two decades [Bangladesh] has experienced multiple catastrophic climatic events' (Alston, 2015:1), and it is expected that the floods and cyclones that affect Bangladesh 'are likely to increase in frequency, intensity, duration and extent' (Cannon, 2002:46). These natural disasters are being exacerbated by climate change, and they destroy and delay development for the country and individual families, both socially and economically (Cannon, 2014). The role of dowry in child marriage in Bangladesh is being exacerbated by climate change due to climate events having an impact on families economically, and therefore having the need to force their daughters to marry while they are younger in order for the dowry payment to be lower; and also so the family no longer have to provide food for that child. In a study by Alston *et al.* (2014:141), 45% of participants from Bangladesh reported that 'girls were now being forced into child marriages as a direct result of climate events and subsequent poverty'. This is also outlined by Action Aid (2019), who stated that 'climate disasters can increase pressure on girls to marry young and drop out of school, as already poor families struggle to feed their children'.

With regards to natural disasters, some people are more vulnerable than others; with vulnerability being defined as the ability to 'anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard' (Kelly and Adger, 2009:163). It is expressed by Cannon (2014:352), that vulnerability is also a characteristic of 'being part of a socioeconomic system that allocates risk unequally between different social groups', and gender is one of these social groups. Women are more vulnerable in Bangladesh to these natural disasters due to their mobility being restricted for a number of reasons. One of these reasons being that many women are not allowed 'to go to shelters without the permission of their husbands' (Alston, 2015:11), and women are also 'expected to be subservient to male opinion and authority, and to be escorted by a male relative when outside the home' (15). Another reason for women's restricted mobility is that their clothing restricts their movement in floods (Cannon, 2002), and married women are vulnerable to this too, as 'married Bangladeshi women wear saris... a garment that restricts movement' (Alston, 2015:15). Not only are women less mobile than men, they are also vulnerable to violence due to shelters potentially being unsafe (*ibid.*). After a natural disaster has occurred, women are also vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies due to the interruptions of the supply of birth control pills (Nasreen 2008, cited in Alston *et al.*, 2014). This shows how women are more vulnerable than men in natural disasters due to the already prevalent gender inequalities in Bangladesh.

Implications in Bangladesh

The gender inequalities, child marriage and climate issues that have been discussed have both short term and long-term impacts on the young girls, and implications on the family and the country. As previously mentioned, child marriage has an impact on a young girls' education, but also on their 'psychological well-being, human rights and economic survival'

(Walker 2012, cited in Kamal *et al.*, 2014). It is a human right for every child to have an education (EHRC, 2018), however some families feel like they have no option but to remove their daughters from school in order to benefit them economically. It becomes a vicious cycle, as girls are removed from education in order to marry while they are still young, and therefore they struggle to get a good job, meaning in the future their own family struggles economically and they have no choice but to subject their young daughters to child marriage too; therefore impacting their own daughters' psychological well-being, human rights and economic survival'. Sometimes women are not only impacted psychologically but also physically, as a study by Alston *et al.* (2014:141) states, 'several women reported that violence occurs when families are unable to fulfil their dowry commitments or when new demands for additional dowry are made'. The violence that women experience would not only impact them physically but would also have long-term psychological impacts.

The impact of climate change and the subsequent natural disasters are continually disrupting the lives of many local communities in Bangladesh (Alam and Ahmed, 2009). As stated earlier, these natural disasters not only have social and economic impacts on the individual families that are affected, but also affect the development of the country (Cannon, 2014). Again, this is a vicious cycle, the barriers to development caused by climate change and natural disasters, mean that families are stuck in poverty and are unable to keep their young daughters in school and may feel that their only option is to subject them to child marriage. Thus, showing how 'climate change is facilitating child marriage and dowry transactions' (Alston *et al.*, 2014:139), and how the issues of gender inequalities, child marriage and climate issues are all linked and impacting individual families' and the country's overall development.

Mitigation efforts

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are helping to work towards gender equality, access to education for all, and action towards climate change. Sustainable Development Goal 4 is 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UN, 2019a). Target 4.1 is to ensure that by 2030 'all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education' (*ibid.*). The progress reports state that '262 million children and youth aged 6 to 17 were still out of school in 2017' (*ibid.*). This means that the SDG is still very far off its target, however Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are trying to help. Friendship is an NGO that is helping to provide free education for all in Bangladesh by 'building schools in poor, remote communities where previously there were no governmental schools' (Friendship, 2016). It also uses donations to help fund a child's education to prevent them from dropping out as their parents can not afford the fees (*ibid.*), and thus could help to prevent parents removing their children from school and subjecting them to child marriage as they no longer have to fund their child's education. In a study by UNICEF (2005:6), it was shown that 'in 42 of the countries analysed, women 20-24 years of age who had attended primary school were less likely to be married by age 18 than those who had not', suggesting that education is key in preventing child marriage, and therefore it is important that there are continuing strategies to achieve inclusive and quality education for all.

Sustainable Development Goal 5 is to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' (UN, 2019b). Target 5.3 is to 'eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation' (*ibid.*). The progress report in 2019 examined how 'the practice of child marriage has continued to decline... in South Asia, where a girl's risk of marrying in childhood decreased by about one quarter between 2013 and 2018' (*ibid.*), thus showing that improvements are being made. It is stated by Alston *et al.*, (2014:141) that 'teachers and health workers attempt to persuade families to resist the pressures to marry their daughters early', showing how young girls in Bangladesh have support from other adults in their life to encourage them to stay in education. Target 5.C is for '...the promotion of gender

equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels' (UN, 2019b). Naila Kabeer (1994) 'placed empowerment at the centre of efforts to achieve gender equality' (cited in Parpart, 2014:408). The progress report in 2019 outlines that 'over the past 25 years, there has been progress in reforming laws towards improving gender equality, yet discriminatory laws and gaps in legal protection remain in many countries' (UN, 2019b), therefore outlining how progress towards gender equality and empowerment is struggling.

Sustainable Development Goal 13 aims to 'take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts' (UN, 2019c), and the 2019 progress report states how 185 countries have consented to the Paris agreement to help combat climate change. Target 13.1 is to 'strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries' (ibid.). Action Aid is an NGO who began working in Bangladesh in 1983, and they 'support vulnerable communities to adapt to climate change and protect themselves against future disasters' (Action Aid, 2019). They also 'build flood-proof villages, provide salt-resistant seeds, teach children how to survive in a disaster and build child-friendly spaces where they can continue their studies when the route to school is flooded' (ibid.), which means that they are also helping to continue to provide education to the children when natural disasters strike, and therefore also helping towards providing an education for all. However, despite their actions to build flood-proof villages, in 2014 '150,000 people's homes were completely destroyed by flash floods' (ibid.), meaning that whilst Action Aid are helping Bangladesh, every new natural disaster disrupts their progress. Oxfam is also an NGO that operates in Bangladesh to 'empower communities to raise their voices for fair adaptation policies, compensation and responses' (Oxfam, 2012). Both NGOs are helping towards target 13.1 by helping Bangladesh adapt to climate change. Target 13.B aims to 'promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States, including focusing on women, youth and local and marginalised communities' (UN, 2019c). It is argued by Alston (2015:33), that 'including women in climate actions and adopting a gendered analysis in climate research is fundamental to global actions for future sustainability'. This outlines how achieving gender equality can help to enable a better planning system for those who are most at risk from natural disasters.

Conclusion

Overall, gender inequalities and rates of child marriage are decreasing and climate change action is improving in Bangladesh, due to the Sustainable Development goals and work by NGOs. However, these interlinked issues still have a large prevalence in Bangladesh. As suggested previously, 'improving access to education for both boys and girls and eliminating gender gaps in education are important strategies in ending the practice of child marriage' (UNICEF 2005:27); I believe that this is the best strategy in order to achieve gender equality, to reduce the rates of child marriage and to help educate all on how to adapt to the impacts of climate change. It is also believed by Kamal *et al* (2014), that 'increasing women's access to higher education and level of educational attainment are the most effective means of increasing women's individual benefits and also the overall development of the country'. This suggests that education is the most important factor, and therefore in order to improve the overall development of the country and women's lives within it, NGOs should be focusing their efforts on improving the quality of education for all. It is believed by Cannon (2002:49) that 'if progress continues to be made in improving women's lives and reducing gender inequalities through empowerment activities by NGOs, then there is potential to reduce women's unequal vulnerability as the hazards increase with climate change'. Therefore, overall, NGOs are having a positive impact in Bangladesh and are helping towards improving the quality of life for women, and with the continuation of their help there is the potential to reach gender equality. However, currently this is still a long way off, and NGOs will struggle to change the deeply rooted gender inequalities based on Bangladesh's culture; however, NGOs can help to minimise the effects that climate change is having on these gender inequalities

and therefore, the continuation of their work is paramount. In order to help tackle the issues Bangladesh are facing, climate change needs to be tackled on a global level; which is a focus NGOs should be moving towards to help mitigate the increasing severity of the natural disasters that impact Bangladesh.

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