



State of World Population 2020

Against my will: defying the practices that harm women and girls and undermine equality

Messages

Harm is discrimination today and a trauma for a lifetime

Harmful practices against girls cause profound and lasting trauma, robbing them of their right to reach their potential in life.

Child Marriage:

- Harmful practices, such as child marriage, are inflicted on girls by their families and propped up by discrimination and community norms.
- Child marriage is a marriage in which one or both of the spouses are under the age of 18 years old.
- While child marriage is a reality for both boys and girls in Nepal, girls are disproportionately the most affected. Child brides face a host of challenges, because they are not emotionally and physically ready to become wives and mothers; they are less likely to remain in schools, more likely to experience domestic violence and face complications during pregnancy and delivery.
- At its core, child marriage is rooted in gender discrimination and gender inequality.
- Child marriage is recognized as a human rights violation. Many international and regional agreements prohibit child marriage, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriage, Convention on the Rights of the Child, among others.
- Yet child marriage persists, especially in poor and rural parts of Nepal. More often than not, child marriage is the outcome of limited choices.
- Nepal has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Asia – for both girls and boys. Although the legal age of marriage for both sexes is 20, an estimated 40 percent of Nepali girls are married before the age of 18. While child marriage rates are declining in the country, in the last five years the pace of decline has slowed down significantly. Investing in girls, giving them access to education and health services, and ensuring that they can postpone marriage and prevent early childbearing is essential for girls to have agency.
- Nepal needs to invest in girls, ensure they have access to education and health services, and enable them to postpone marriage until they are ready; all this means greater dignity for women and girls; it means healthier families and higher levels of gender equality. This makes for stronger societies and more vibrant economies.

Gender-biased sex selection:

- One pernicious effect of preferring sons over daughters is a shocking deficit of 140 million females around the world.
- An extreme preference for sons over daughters has fueled gender-biased sex selection in Nepal. Nepal has an increasing sex ratio at birth imbalance from 103 males per every 100 female newborns in 2005 to 110 male newborns in 2015. This is a reflection of persistent gender discrimination that undervalues girls combined with the declining fertility rate and high level of son preference, leading to an increase in the practice of sex-selective abortion.

Only equal treatment can bring equal outcomes

We have to stop treating girls like commodities to be traded or objects to be controlled and afford girls the same rights and opportunities as boys.

- Communities must stand for equal rights for girls so they can stay in school, prepare for employment, learn about their choices, and shape their own futures.
- Governments must honor the international agreements they have signed to protect girls' rights and reproductive choices and end child marriage.
- To end harmful practices, men need to use their privilege to raise the value of girls around the world and demand the equal treatment of girls and boys.
- Economies and legal systems must guarantee every woman equal opportunities to build a decent life based on equality, autonomy, dignity and choice.

Respect. Protect. Fulfill. Three words that can bring real change and real results for women and girls

- *Respect:* We must foster respect for women and girls by changing entrenched cultural attitudes and practices that dehumanize and commoditize them. This means disrupting root causes of inequality and respecting girls' autonomy.
- *Protect:* We must protect women and girls by enacting and enforcing laws against practices like child marriage, but also by changing attitudes and norms. Parents need to understand the impact of harm and take a stand against it.
- *Fulfill:* The federal, provincial and local governments must fulfill their obligations to end of child marriage and other harmful practices.

COVID-19 threatens to thwart progress in ending harmful practices

- The COVID-19 pandemic is interrupting programs to end child marriage and harmful practices; in the emergency context, child marriage is likely to increase.

- As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, the number of women unable to access family planning, facing unintended pregnancies, gender-based violence and harmful practices could skyrocket in the months ahead.