

Feminist anxiety over 'child marriage' in Bangladesh

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A coalition of NGOs working on child rights hold a protest rally against the special provision in the latest child marriage act with the slogan 'No clause with 18.'

WHEN I was an eighth grader in school, a new teacher, someone who was on training in our school, once told us in the class, 'You know what, you are still children.' At this remark, I remember, the whole class, a good total of fifty girls, burst out laughing!

'Really, sir?' we asked.

We were a little surprised to know that we would be considered as children till we were in 12th grade. I invoke this story because this comes from a period when the UN child rights discourse was not normalised in the way as it is today, so much so that for some, the recent enactment of 'Child Marriage Restraint Bill 2017' which has a special provision of marriage of girls below 18 years and boys below 21 years, is seen as a 'dark day' in the history of our country.

My Facebook newsfeed in recent months has been flooded with my friends and colleagues' pouring rage on the recent legal move on 'child marriage.' Recently, at the Central Shaded Minar in Dhaka, a protest was also held with the slogan, '18-r sathe kono sharta nay (No clause with 18).' It was organised by some quarters of woman's movement in Dhaka. The information and images of the event which circulated in social media, has given me the impression that a good number of people gathered there, which included NGO leaders, their partner organisations, and also youth volunteers. Juxtaposing this event with another protest from the same day, where few activist friends of mine were demanding the return of the dead bodies of Tampaco Foils workers. Two events, just few kilometres from one another — Central Shaheed Minar and Press Club Dhaka — gathered very different kind of public attention. It is disturbing for me to note that this latter event was attended by a handful of people. Since then I have been thinking: How events such as the one on child marriage can pull huge crowd easily, but not the latter one? Isn't this also a stark reminder that the lives of the workers don't matter in Bangladesh? Or does this imply that the mandate for CEDAW is more important than the everyday struggles of the working class people in Bangladesh?

My aim in this piece is to demonstrate, through the use of some pertinent examples of recent debate in relation to the new act on 'child marriage', how a universal charter of children's rights (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) contributes to the production of subjectivity amongst the 'educated' middle class, and to develop a criticism of the global governance of 'child rights' in Bangladesh. I ask, why does the fixing of marriageable age have created so much fuss in Bangladesh? When and how the age of marriage has become an important issue for the activists here in Bangladesh?

In the wake of government's recent move, the 'voices' and 'conversations' around 'child marriage' by the activists (which of course I came to know via social and mainstream media) can be read in the following manners: Firstly, there is a 'worry' that if parents give marriage to their daughters at an early age, they will be deprived of education and childhood (i.e. the stolen 'childhood' thesis often found in development literature). Secondly, there exists a notion that girls are always 'forced' to get married. Thirdly, the assumption is also made that if girls get married early on, this will lead to an early pregnancy which could bring negative health consequences for them and their coming children. Finally, there is a general

representation of 'child marriage' in media, particularly in the Western media that the girls in slums and villages in Bangladesh are in a 'grave situation' and they can be 'victim' of 'child marriage' any time! All these representations of 'child marriage' are certainly depressing! But what struck me here is how all these anxieties, worries and assumptions on girls and their plight are reductive, and on many occasions, over generalised. To begin with, this debate is class based and the discussion assumes as if girls constitute a homogeneous group in Bangladesh. Marriage questions are framed as if they are always 'forced' and girls do not have any agency. The NGOised narrative which is now having a broad base reproduces a 'victim image' of girls in Bangladesh too.

I feel much of this narrative does not resonate with us, people who have lived their lives in this country. To put it another way, among the people who are fighting for the 'girls' rights', is there anyone who hasn't experienced that thousands of girls in Bangladesh work in other people's households? What better options they/their parents have than working/ sending in other people's household (read middle class households and annoyed people with the new law)? As a corollary point: How many among 'us' take the whole responsibility of the girls who work in our households? How many people treat 'them' as their own family members? Do we? I know these are difficult questions to ask to ourselves considering the very context within which we live in (where there are enormous discriminations and inequalities). Do we have any account of how many girls actually earn their living and provide money to their families for survival? How many girls live on the streets? How many beg for their livelihood? How many girls work in the garment factory from their young age? Are we concerned for them? Or ourselves? Or, do we think that all the girls of the country live in an 'ideal' condition like 'our' girls? If not, then who are we to come up with this 'saving our girls model' to save the 'poor' girls?

I think these are some questions that deserve serious attention. I cannot but note a clear anxiety amongst the 'pragatisheel (progressive)' people in the country on the issue of demarcating the age of marriage. For this group, the country is going 'backward' due to the government's move to fix marriage age of girls below eighteen. In this connection, what I would like to highlight is that the NGO discourse in Bangladesh often refers to the UN conventions like CEDAW as a guiding principle in order to criticise the government's recent move on 'child marriage'. It demonstrates how the transnational legal framework of gender operates in Bangladesh.

What should we make of it? How this 'one size fits all' model is so useful to respond to the multiple and complex experiences of the girls in this country? As someone born and brought up in this country I cannot help but seeing many limitations of working within this supposedly universal framework. Bracketing my own experience for the time being, here I draw from a very interesting reading by Sally E Merry (2006) on the limitations of these universalistic frameworks such as CEDAW, CRC. Merry, an anthropologist, notes how these universal guidelines have been created through the 'consensus building' among the global elites from around the world. She notes that this universalistic language does not actually speak to the experiences of the majority of people's lives, particularly the poor, and the marginalised (who are often the target population of these interventions). The debate around 'child marriage' in Dhaka provides us a better opportunity to appreciate her critique, especially how the activist 'voices' in our country are speaking from a point of view which does not connect to the majority of the people, who are the 'poor' and 'marginalised.' Chandra T Mohanty's (1984) argument may from few decades ago also prove to be illuminating here. Mohanty has shown how US feminist scholarship generally produces an idea of women of the 'Third world' as a homogeneous category who are 'oppressed' and 'victims' of patriarchy. For Mohanty, for the 'Third world' activists, it is their foremost duty to uncover the material and ideological specificities of this kind of construction which represents women as a 'powerless' group in a particular context.

In the case of recent, still unfolding, debates on 'child marriage' in Bangladesh, I see how a particular kind of knowledge about 'child marriage' through pamphlets, posters, and research has been produced, where girls are categorised as homogeneous and 'powerless' entities. The fact that a lot of woman activists in Bangladesh ended up in the first event and not the second event I invoked at the beginning of this piece, is an indication of how subjectivity is produced through the universal frameworks of 'rights.'

To bring back my own experiences, I was recently visiting a Santal para (neighbourhood), sitting in a winter morning beside a church, at Maddhya Bohola village in Dinajpur of Bangladesh. They were telling stories of their lives, how most of the girls and boys at the age of 12/13 work in other people's agricultural field to earn their living. At one point, one of the elderly amongst the group said, 'we realise there is no other way to live a good life without education, but what to do? It costs a lot, how can we spend that much money when we cannot fulfil our everyday necessities?'

Adding further he said, '[For education] ...at least you have to have your food, right? You have to have electricity at home. It is easier choice for the children to go for work, rather than to go to the school. Especially during harvesting season, it is a very difficult option for our children, as it is a time to earn for the rest of the year. Once children are absent for few days in school, they cannot adjust with the syllabus. We cannot afford tuition! ...if you cannot provide the cost for education, then it is better to send the girl to other people's home, and marriage is the best way!'

I had a similar experience with a group of 'youth volunteers' of one NGO, in a Rabidas para (located in a village in Dinajpur). Here I came to know how the youth group in the village was working to end 'child marriage.' As part of an NGO campaign, they were perhaps prompted to bring this issue up for us! But that is a different methodological point. After some probing I got into the complications of the straight forward narrative of 'child marriage' and prevention. The youth group was telling us a story that they went to a nearby village after getting information of a 'child marriage' happening in the area but to their dismay they were not able to stop the marriage as it was in an 'advanced stage.' I asked, what they actually meant by what they called 'advanced stage'. To this question, there was a silence for a while. The group in question didn't know what to answer. Suddenly, an aged woman sitting beside us and overhearing our conversation said, 'The family is very poor.' Joining the conversation the members of the youth group then added: 'During our negotiation with the family, the parents of the girl told us: 'we can't afford food for the whole family, how can we provide education to my girl? If you stop her marriage, will you feed my family?' But the schools are free for girls I thought. I probed a bit more. The answer: 'The government commitment for free education for the girls is a misnomer for the 'poor' people, as education does not only mean to provide free books and regular school fees. There are many other costs associated with education. On top of everything, education is a kind of investment of time; if a child invests her time for work, at least they can earn something for their family. Most of the people among us do not have land. We need to earn everything for our living.'

My question is how does this global activism against 'child marriage' speak to these various experiences? In the prime minister's remark on 'child marriage', there are some points which are coming from the ground. What I would like to say, however, is that the 'rights' discourse overlooks the systemic problems/structural issues and individualises it. Being a feminist in a Third world context, we need to locate our politics, in other words, we need to understand the politics of location. If we cannot, then perhaps it is better not to criminalise the 'poor' parents of the 'poor' girls in the name of combating 'child marriage.' Let them do their struggle who are fighting for survival within the structure!

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