

**Interview with Lakshmi Sundaram
primarily responsible coordinator of Girls Not Brides**

The name of your organization is pointing to your principal aim: a world in which girls have the right just to be children, without the danger of being married at an early age. But when, would you say, is a girl coming of age? The legal age at which one can get married varies depending on the country. In Iran, for example, a girl is supposed to be of age already when she is nine years old, in Pakistan at the age of sixteen, whereas in many Western countries not until 18. When, in your opinion, can/ may a girl, a young woman get married?

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), governments have committed to ensure the overall protection of children and young people aged under 18. However, child marriage and the range of rights implications it has, substantially infringe on these protections. That is why *Girls Not Brides* members are advocating for a minimum age of marriage of 18 in their countries.

Even within individual countries, we often see inconsistencies in the legal age of marriage. While most countries have laws in place that set a minimum age of marriage, often 18, many countries provide exceptions to the minimum age of marriage, upon parental consent or authorisation of the court. In some cases, customary or religious laws which set lower minimum ages of marriage take precedence over national law. Where such exceptions exist, our members are calling for change. For example in Pakistan, our members have been active in calling on the government to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 for both boys and girls.

It has to be said, however, that having a minimum age of marriage of 18 is not enough. After all, laws will only be effective if they're enforced. This requires raising awareness of laws and ensuring that they are understood, as well as building accountability for their implementation. But given that real change has to happen from the ground up, it is also important that governments support programmes which are aimed at changing attitudes towards girls who are all too often seen as second-class citizens.

In the so-called "developing countries", 1 in 3 girls is married before the age of 18. Why do girls have to get married so early?

The scale of the problem is huge: child marriage affects an estimated 14 million girls every year. It is truly a global issue that cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities.

Girls are married early for numerous reasons. Parents living in poverty may feel that they have no other choice but to marry their daughter off at a young age as it will be one less mouth to feed. Or for those who face insecurity and violence in their daily lives, parents may believe that marriage will keep their daughters safe. Another reason may be tradition, where the practice of child marriage has taken place over generations and continues to do so "because that's how things have always been". While the drivers vary in different contexts, what we see across countries, communities, and cultures, is that girls are disproportionately affected by the practice which is deeply rooted in gender inequalities and discriminatory social norms. Our challenge is to make the case to parents that girls who avoid early marriage and stay in school will likely be able to make a greater contribution to their family and their community in the long term.

After an early marriage, the girl often gets pregnant very soon, which means definitely the end of childhood for her. Which consequences does she have to face in this situation?

The consequences of early marriage on a girl's physical and mental well-being can be devastating. For most child brides, being forced to marry before the age of 18 – sometimes as young as 6 or 7 – means being exposed to the risks related to early sexual activity and childbearing. And these risks are greater the younger the bride.

Child marriage and poor maternal health outcomes around the world are inextricably linked. The leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 in low to middle-income countries is complications in pregnancy and childbirth. What is less often highlighted is the fact that 90% of adolescent childbirths in the developing world are to girls who are already married.

Girls who marry before the age of 18 face pressure to prove their fertility quickly. They are more likely to experience unwanted pregnancies, and are at higher risk of sexual and reproductive health morbidities and maternal mortality. Girls who give birth before the age of 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than girls in their 20s.

On a positive note, we're seeing a lot of momentum building internationally around the need to ensure that more women are able to use and assert their right to family planning, and it is vital that we talk about adolescent girls in these debates. With so many adolescent births taking place within marriage, it's crucial that family planning services address the unique needs and circumstances of married girls and that they have access to quality health information and services so that they can safely plan the number of children they want to have.

The many and interdependent causes for early marriages make it difficult to fight this phenomenon. Does "Girls Not Brides" see any possible solutions?

It is a very complex problem, but there are a range of solutions which have been proven to delay the age of marriage. Education is one such powerful tool. When a girl in the developing world receives seven or more years of education, she marries on average four years later. Other examples of effective solutions include encouraging prominent community/religious leaders to take a stand against the practice as they are such influential voices within their communities.

At the heart of many child marriage cases is that girls simply aren't valued as much as boys. That is why engaging with men, boys and other family members is also crucial to change attitudes and challenge gender roles. And of course, as I mentioned previously, enacting and enforcing minimum age of marriage laws is another key part of efforts to end child marriage.

Ultimately we need more evidence-based programming on the issue, as well as ensuring that larger scale structural efforts aimed at other goals such as education, health and poverty reduction are making the connection with child marriage prevention. There is a role for us all in making that happen.

At *Girls Not Brides* we help members to share their ideas and lessons from their efforts to end child marriage with organisations around the world working on this issue.

Working in partnership means that we can exchange best practices and support and highlight the programmatic work being carried out in various countries by our members.

“Girls Not Brides” consists of more than 300 NGOs around the globe. Which organizations are involved? A network of this dimension seems to be difficult to coordinate. But surely, to cooperate on this world-wide level also has advantages. Could you kindly name some? And do you have a common position?

Girls Not Brides members vary in size, location, and the type of work they do – be they grassroots groups or service providers working to end child marriage and support child brides in their communities, to organisations that focus on research and advocacy, seeking to bring global, regional and national attention to this neglected problem. We have members in Malaysia who are using UN human rights mechanisms such as the universal periodic review at the Human Rights Council to encourage greater political commitment by the government on the issue. In Cameroon our members are working with wives of traditional leaders to change attitudes and in Ethiopia our members are working with the government to provide support to married girls.

Working in partnership brings numerous rewards and also challenges. Numerous programmes to end child marriage are in place in various parts of the world, but the challenge for us is to see how change can take place on a wider scale. At the secretariat we work to foster an environment where this collaborative dialogue can take place.

Two major regional meetings of *Girls Not Brides* members in South Asia, and Africa have helped to foster the growing movement of organisations working to end the practice of child marriage, to reduce the isolation that is sometimes felt in working on such a sensitive issue, and to exchange lessons learned and solutions adopted by the various organisations. The spirit of collaboration that has developed among organisations during these regional meetings has helped the partnership to grow and strengthen.

These meetings have also helped to prompt collective action to address child marriage on the national level and have precipitated organisations coming together at the national level to develop country specific strategies to address child marriage.

Could you illustrate your work by telling us more about a concrete project or cooperation?

At the *Girls Not Brides* Secretariat we have been working to galvanise efforts within and beyond our membership to break down taboos around child marriage. Earlier this year, for example, over 80 *Girls Not Brides* members from 30 different countries united to express support for a Turkish human rights activist who had been charged with offences related to speaking out against child marriage in Turkey. The call for action was reported in national media and demonstrated that there is a growing global movement of actors determined to speak up and address the issue of child marriage.

We have also been mobilising the partnership to translate the increasing international attention that we have seen on child marriage into real on-the-ground change. For too long, adolescent girls have been neglected in international development and the continued existence of child, early and forced marriage around the world is a symptom of that lack of attention. Given that child marriage has directly hindered the achievement

of 6 of the 8 Millennium Development Goals, we've been working with members to advocate for the inclusion of child marriage in the post-2015 development framework. We have also been encouraging our members to make submissions highlighting critical actions needed to end child marriage in their country for the upcoming report by the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights on the issue of child, early and forced marriage. The report will be presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2014.

The internet portal of "Girls Not Brides" offers a wide range of background information on early marriage. And beyond that, we can learn about the histories of affected girls, thus their lives getting more comprehensible for us. Among all these stories, there are also biographies of girls who were able to change their forced destiny. So, can we look into the future in an optimistic way?

Yes, most definitely. Just a few years ago child marriage received very little attention in international development and human rights fora. It was deemed a taboo topic. In many places it still is. But we're seeing many more people around the world taking a stand against this practice and doing their part to ensure all girls and women are able to choose if, when and whom to marry, and can fulfil their potential. Of course we need to be realistic; it will be a long and difficult process to end child marriage. However, I am convinced that we can end child marriage in one generation; time and again we see that when a girl is able to delay marriage into adulthood she is far less likely to marry off her own daughters as children.

We also know that change is happening. We have seen numerous cases where girls have been empowered to make their own decisions about their future. We believe that by working in partnership, with governments, communities, families, men and boys, and of course the girls themselves, we can end child marriage and secure a better, brighter future for all girls around the world.

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