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# **Bangladeshi law proposing child marriage in "special cases" is a step backwards – charities**

***The proposed law would permit child marriage in "special cases"***

By Nita Bhalla

Thomson Reuters Foundation (13.01.2017) - <http://tmsnrt.rs/2jxMRzO> - Bangladesh will be taking a step backwards in efforts to end child marriage if parliament approves changes to a law which would permit girls below 18 to be married in "special cases", a global alliance of charities said on Thursday.

The poor South Asian nation has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, despite a three-decade-old law which bans marriage for girls under 18 and men under 21.

Girls Not Brides, a coalition of more than 650 charities, said Bangladesh's parliament was expected to consider the proposed change to the Child Marriage Restraint Act. This is expected to take place in the next session beginning Jan. 22.

Girls Not Brides in Bangladesh said the proposed change was "alarming" and a step backwards for the country which has reduced child marriage in recent years.

"We have worked with thousands of girls who have been pulled out of education, married off early, bear the scars of early pregnancy, and forced to marry their abusers. This is simply unacceptable," said a spokesperson from the alliance's Bangladesh chapter in a statement.

The proposed law was open to abuse since it gave no definition of the term "special cases", Girls Not Brides said.

Statements made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina suggest exceptions would apply in instances of accidental pregnancy, or where a marriage would help to protect a girl's "honour" and the family's reputation in this largely conservative society.

Bangladeshi officials were not immediately available for comment.

Along with Niger, Guinea, South Sudan, Chad and Burkina Faso, Bangladesh is among the 10 worst countries for child marriage despite moves to strengthen law enforcement and toughen penalties against the crime.

In 2011, 32.5 percent of girls aged between 15 and 19 were married compared with 37.5 percent a decade before, said Girls Not Brides, citing data from Bangladesh's Bureau of Statistics.

Campaigners say girls face a greater risk of rape, domestic violence and forced pregnancies - which may put their lives in danger - as a result of being married as children.

Child brides are often denied the chance to go to school, are isolated from society and forced into a lifetime of economic dependence as a wife and mother.

Yet the practice continues largely due to a combination of social acceptance and government inaction, activists say.

"Marriage before 18 does not ensure a pregnant girl's safety," said Lakshmi Sundaram, executive director for Girls Not Brides, said in the statement. "In reality it exposes her to the risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence."

"The progress Bangladesh has made to address child marriage is impressive, and reflects a real commitment from the highest levels of the government. Now is not the time to regress."

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