

Uproar after Somali lawmaker presents bill to legalise child marriage

By Abdi Sheikh

Reuters (20.08.2020) – <https://reut.rs/34sZ9ko> – Hafsa was married off at 13 by her father to a man who paid \$100. She and her mother say she was beaten and raped for two years before they convinced him to divorce her.

“The man just slept with me, beating me always,” she said, sitting by her mother, who clutches her daughter tightly. “I regretted I was born.”

There is no law mandating a minimum age for marriage in Somalia. A bill introduced in parliament this month by a presidential ally caused a storm of criticism from lawmakers when they realised it would legalise marriage at puberty – as early as 10 for some girls.

Data from a government survey this year shows that nearly a third of girls are married before their 18th birthday – just under half of those before the age of 15.

“Some families marry off their daughters to reduce their economic burden or earn income. Others may do so because they believe it will secure their daughters’ futures or protect

them,” said Dheepa Pandian, a spokeswoman from UNICEF, the United Nations’ Children’s Fund.

Political turmoil in Somalia – the prime minister was sacked last month and elections due this year will likely be delayed – means it is unclear when parliament might vote on the bill. The Horn of Africa nation is also battling an Islamist insurgency.

Many lawmakers, like legislator and human rights activist Sahra Omar Malin, reject the bill.

“Our constitution is based on Islam. It says the age of maturity is 18, this is the right age for voting or for a girl to marry,” she said.

Deputy speaker Abdiweli Mudeey, who presented the bill, did not return calls seeking comment but told lawmakers that it had been reviewed by clerics and “this bill ... is the correct one based on Islam.”

Nadifa Hussein, who runs three camps in the capital for families fleeing violence, shelters many abused and abandoned child brides.

“Most women here were married at 13 and are divorced by the time they are 20,” Hussein said. “They have no one to feed them.”

Among them is Sirad, a shy 16-year-old with two children. Her husband has left, but if he comes back she must welcome him, she said sadly.

“Who else wants me?” she asked, covering her face. “If you are thrown into a well and can’t come out, the only option is to try to swim.”

‘There hasn’t been rehabilitation’: Afghanistan struggles with fate of ‘Daesh wives’

The Afghan government is facing hard decisions over the futures of hundreds of detained radicalised women and their children.

By Elise Blanchard

The Guardian (26.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/38cp8w6> – The “Daesh wives” from the Afghan branch of Islamic State look very young. Most are already mothers.

Hundreds of them have fled combat, airstrikes and near-starvation in eastern Afghanistan where the faction of Isis known as Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK) has been under fierce bombardment from Afghan and US special forces, as well as involved in violent clashes with rival militants the Taliban.

Last November, after a military operation, President Ashraf Ghani declared Isis “obliterated” in the region where it first gained a foothold in 2014, and more than 225 militants, 190 women and 208 children surrendered.

In Jalalabad city, separated from the male fighters who were taken to other detention centres or prisons, the women were first housed by local authorities in a makeshift accommodation centre, awaiting transfer to Kabul or back to the remote Afghan and Pakistani tribal areas where most originated.

In the centre, children were everywhere— — running, laughing, playing with colourful toys. On the walls they’d drawn drones, explosions, men shooting AK-47s from pickup trucks— — memories of their time spent in hell near the Pakistani border in Nangarhar province, ISK’s former stronghold.

Weakened and pushed farther north, the group, with an estimated 2,200 armed fighters, retains sleeper cells in cities such as Kabul, and continues to claim responsibility for murderous attacks on civilians.

Most of the girls and women the Guardian spoke to in Jalalabad and in the detention centre of the Afghan intelligence

services in Kabul refuse to criticise ISK.

“Only God knows if Daesh is good or bad,” says Asma, 15, from the tribal areas, and mother of a little girl. Why did she join the fighters? “My father gave me to my husband,” she says. “I was scared.”

Lyla Schwartz, a psychologist supporting some of the girls in the Kabul juvenile detention centre, says this was probably true. “In this context and culture, I don’t think it’s very likely that all of these girls had a say if they joined or not.

“The children and women experience sexual abuse,” she adds. “Do they support the group? No. Ideologies? Yes. Do they believe in an Islamic state where people practise certain things and believe certain situations and things they have been taught? Yes. And is that pretty strict and conservative? I would say yes. But they don’t agree in the fighting, and the war and the trauma that they see.”

But Schwartz, founder of the NGO Peace of Mind Afghanistan, is concerned at the lack of care for the women and girls. “There hasn’t been rehabilitation, like education, psychological processing of trauma.”

Asma followed her husband when he crossed the border with Isis but she had to surrender, she says, to escape “the bombs that fall from the sky”.

Most of the dozens of family members we interviewed spoke of airstrikes that had killed many women and children. It was in this region in 2017 that President Donald Trump tested the largest conventional bomb ever dropped by in combat by the US, his “mother of all bombs”. –

“A bomb blast killed my baby and I picked up his body piece by piece,” says Hamida, who said she was “19 or 20”.

“Americans did it,” she adds. Like Asma, Hamida is an ethnic Pashtun from the tribal areas. She joined at 15, with a husband who was also underage at the time. “Isis taught him how to use weapons and that fighting with others was good work,” she says.

In another room, Mariam, 16, was resting, heavily pregnant with her second child. Her Afghan village, Takhto, was the theatre for shocking atrocities. One video showed ISK members killing local elders by making them kneel on explosives.

Mariam says she misses her husband, a Pakistani fighter twice her age. She was given to him as a wife by her brother-in-law after ISK took over her village.

“We stayed back home and served our husbands,” recounts her cousin, another 15-year-old Afghan mother. “Now we want to go back to our home.”

Other women came from farther afield, from central and south Asia or from Europe, sometimes more educated, sometimes joining a son or brother.

Deeba, 52, sold her house in Lahore and came to Afghanistan with her family to join her son, already living with Isis there. "He told us only here is pure Islam, that coming is like the Islamic [hajj]," she says, seated in the detention centre.

In the mountains, Deeba kept running the family: she remarried her daughter-in-law to another of her sons when the first was killed in an airstrike. She arranged the marriage of her widowed daughter, Rewa — who had lost her husband in combat just a month after their wedding — to a nephew who himself had lost his first wife in a rocket explosion.

Despite so much sorrow in her 22 years, Rewa is cheerful. "Life was simple there, we chose to live just like our prophet used to live ... we were happy," she says.

"The men in Daesh were better than the men here ... they would turn their eyes not to look at us." And attacks on civilians? "I swear it's a big lie ... they have never done anything like that," she responds.

Atfah, 24, from Punjab, arrived from Pakistan to live with Isis about three years ago, with her sisters and mother, an ex-English teacher. One brother died fighting in Syria. A second one told them to join him in Afghanistan.

“My brother called us to come for jihad,” she says. “He said that the Americans drop airstrikes and put bombs on Muslims, and kill our children and women ... That’s why we do jihad.”

Handling hundreds of women and children is an unprecedented challenge for the government.

For Javid Faisal, spokesman of the Afghan National Security Council, the women are a threat. “Wives and children of Daesh fighters were all radicalised to an extreme level,” he warned. “We can’t release them the way they are right now.”

But the reality is more nuanced. According to a security source working on the issue, although some women did have an active role and are awaiting trial for membership of a terrorist group, others “are here because they were accompanying their husbands, and didn’t participate as fighters or support”.

For these women, authorities are trying to establish identities, to send them back to their families or embassies. It is a long process, dogged by political wrangling.

While many women fear being sent home, Ela, 30, wants to leave at any cost. Originally from Turkey, she was troubled by what she found in the rough, remote mountains of Nangarhar. “Afghanistan is like a different planet,” she says.

She is one of the few with harsh words about the fighters: “They think women don’t understand anything.”

In Yemen and around the world, obstetric fistula strikes the most vulnerable women

UNFPA (22.05.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2zmMqTh> – Five years ago, Marwa* was a child bride living in the port city of Al Hudaydah. “I was almost 17 years old, and happy with my new life. I was a new bride and I got pregnant fast. I thought life was smiling at me,” she told UNFPA. She had no idea how quickly life would turn upside down.

Like many other women and girls in Yemen, she gave birth at home. But her labour was obstructed – a potentially fatal complication. Eventually, she delivered a healthy baby boy, but suffered a traumatic injury in the process – an obstetric fistula.

“I had sudden diarrhoea and faeces coming out of my birth canal,” she said. “I started to ask myself, why was this happening? I could not comprehend it.”

An obstetric fistula is a hole between the birth canal and

bladder and/or rectum. It occurs during prolonged, obstructed labour without access to timely, high-quality medical treatment. The injury can cause chronic pain and infections, social rejection and deepening poverty.

This was Marwa's fate: A month after her baby was born, her husband divorced her. "I had become what he described as 'ruined'," she said.

The most vulnerable women

This traumatic birth injury affects the world's most vulnerable women – those living in extreme poverty, without access to timely emergency care. Child brides are particularly vulnerable; childbearing in adolescence can increase vulnerability to obstetric fistula. Those with malnutrition and poor health also face heightened risks.

Hundreds of thousands of women are living with obstetric fistula today. The persistence of this condition is a sign of global social injustice and inequity.

And it could be worsening.

Today, as the world battles the COVID-19 pandemic, health systems risk being overstretched. Transportation barriers, movement restrictions, rising costs and other effects of the pandemic are making it harder for labouring women to reach safe delivery services. "The absence of timely medical

treatment will likely spur a dramatic increase in obstetric fistula,” said Dr. Natalia Kanem, UNFPA’s Executive Director.

On 23 May, as the world observes the International Day to End Obstetric Fistula, UNFPA is sounding the alarm that the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls could be undermined. These services – including access to maternity care and safe delivery care – must be recognized as essential and life-saving.

Under the shadow of war

Marwa’s fistula was only the start of her troubles. Conflict had erupted in Yemen, throwing communities into poverty and hobbling the country’s health system.

“They told me to be patient and accept my fate... I was told that my life is over,” Marwa said, crying over the memory of that time. “I felt so sorry for myself, my youth and my newborn baby who would grow up without a father. I felt my whole life had been taken away from me. What did I do to deserve such fate? I asked that myself repeatedly.”

Marwa spent as much time and money as she could searching for a cure. “It was useless. I knocked on many doors,” she said.

Finally, she visited a midwife named Na’ama, who had received training from a UNFPA-funded programme. “She was my last resort and my only hope.”

By chance, Na'ama had taken a course on preventing and identifying obstetric fistula, and she knew just where Marwa could get care.

Na'ama contacted the National Midwives Association, which runs a UNFPA-supported fistula treatment programme. Marwa was put on a waiting list.

“One day they called me and asked me to travel to Sana'a within a week.”

The fistula programme covered all her travel expenses. She was even able to bring her sister to look after the baby, and a male cousin; women often require a male guardian to travel within the country.

Marwa underwent a successful treatment surgery at Al Thawra Hospital.

Now, she says her life has been transformed. “I forgot all the pain I had gone through. I just felt joy and happiness,” she said.

Support needed

UNFPA has supported the establishment of three fistula units across the country. Between 2018 and 2019, more than 100

fistula surgeries were successfully treated free of charge.

But today, Yemen's health system is on the verge of collapse. Humanitarian funding for programmes in Yemen has dried up, even as the country grapples with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds of reproductive health facilities have closer or are set to close in the coming weeks.

A pledging conference is scheduled to take place, virtually, on 2 June.

**Name changed to protect privacy*

WORLD: Displaced and stateless women and girls at heightened risk of GBV in the coronavirus pandemic

UNHCR (20.04.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2XTxKVi> – Around the world COVID-19 is taking lives and changing communities but the virus is also inducing massive protection risks for women and girls forced to flee their homes, the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, Gillian Triggs, warned today.

“We need to pay urgent attention to the protection of refugee, displaced and stateless women and girls at the time of this pandemic. They are among those most at-risk. Doors should not be left open for abusers and no help spared for women surviving abuse and violence,” said Triggs.

Confinement policies, lockdowns and quarantines adopted across the world as a response to the pandemic have led to restricted movement, reduced community interaction, the closure of services and worsening socio-economic conditions. These factors are significantly exacerbating the risks of intimate partner violence.

“Some may end up confined to their shelters and homes, trapped with their abusers without the opportunity to distance themselves or to seek in-person support.”

“Others, including those without documentation or those who have lost precarious livelihoods, as a result of the economic devastation that COVID-19 has inflicted, may be forced into survival sex or child marriages by their families. Within the household, many women are also taking on increased burdens as caregivers.”

For survivors of violence and those at-risk, the consequences of COVID-19 also mean limited access to life-saving support, such as psycho-social, health and security services. Imposed mobility restrictions and containment measures make it difficult for women to access help while some services, including safe shelters, have been temporarily suspended, re-purposed or closed.

“Globally, our network of UNHCR protection staff are on high alert. Our life-saving programs for women and girls subjected to violence are being adapted where possible. In some locations they are now being managed remotely by social workers with the support of trained community volunteer networks,” said Triggs.

Displaced women themselves remain involved at the forefront of the response, informing their communities about the risks of violence and providing information on prevention and protective health measures. They are also supporting survivors to access available, specialized support.

UNHCR is also distributing emergency cash assistance to support survivors and women-at-risk. Action is also being coordinated across the humanitarian sector to ensure the risks of sexual and gender-based violence are mitigated throughout all sectoral interventions, including but not limited to the emergency health response.

“To preserve lives and secure rights, Governments, together with humanitarian actors, must ensure that rising risks of violence for displaced and stateless women are taken into account in the design of national COVID-19 prevention, response and recovery plans,” said Triggs.

This means ensuring critical services for survivors of gender-based violence are designated as essential and are accessible to those forcibly displaced. These include health and security services for survivors, psycho-social support services and

safe shelters. Access to justice for survivors must also not be diminished.

Given the deteriorating socio-economic conditions now facing many refugee host countries, support from donors will be critically needed to preserve the operations of essential gender-based violence prevention and response services, including those provided by local, women-led organizations.

“All women and girls have the right to a life free from all forms of violence. We must stand with displaced and stateless women and girls as we reiterate the Secretary General’s message and urge all governments to put all women and girls’ safety first as they respond to the pandemic.”

Bangladesh’s child marriage problem is the world’s human trafficking crisis

Why fixing the second issue isn’t possible without addressing the first.

By Corinne Redfern

Foreign Policy (08.11.2019) – <https://bit.ly/36VwNxI> – First Papiya was forced into marriage at 12 years old. Then she was

trafficked into sexual slavery.

Her story isn't unusual. It's echoed by tens of thousands of girls in Bangladesh, highlighting a link between child marriage and sex trafficking that should be impossible to ignore. The country with the highest rate of marriage involving girls under the age of 15 in the world, and where 150,000 to 200,000 children and young women have been trafficked into prostitution, the two forms of abuse are tightly intertwined. Traffickers prey on the vulnerable, and child marriage is what makes girls like Papiya vulnerable in the first place.

But international donors, policymakers, and even the U.S. State Department have failed to recognize this chain of exploitation, and that's slowing down efforts to address it.

Since March 2017, I have interviewed over 400 women trapped behind the walls of four brothels in Bangladesh, in an investigation that was funded by the nonprofit organization Girls Not Brides. Marriage is illegal for girls under the age of 18 (and boys under 21) in Bangladesh under the 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act, although the law allows girls under 18 to marry under "special circumstances"—without establishing a minimum age limit, or clarifying what those circumstances must be. Half of the girls I spoke with told me that they had been married before the age of 18 and believed they had been trafficked into sexual slavery as a direct result.

Yet for all the obvious overlap, trafficking and child marriage in Bangladesh are viewed independently of one another

by the U.S. State Department –and initiatives to end both are kept separate as a result. While child marriage is largely approached by nonprofit organizations through a lens of legislative lobbying and education as prevention, counter-trafficking efforts center on rescue, rehabilitation, and prosecution. Projects that work to prevent trafficking focus on unmarried girls who are still in school.

Approximately 52 percent of girls in Bangladesh are lost in the chasm between child marriage prevention and trafficking rehabilitation: coerced into marriage as children and left without the support they need to protect themselves and safely break out.

Papiya was still trapped in a brothel in the village of Kandipara when I first met her in March 2017. She told me how she fled her in-laws' house barefoot in the middle of the night, leaving her sandals by the door so that the slap of their soles on the stairs didn't wake her 22-year-old husband. As the sun rose, she spotted a rickshaw driver sleeping by the side of the road and begged him for help. He agreed with a smile, she remembered. Then he drove Papiya to a brothel and sold her for more money than he'd usually make in a month.

Now 17, Papiya has been trapped in one of Bangladesh's 11 government-registered, legal brothel villages ever since. Each one enslaves up to 3,000 women and underage girls in sexual servitude that can see them raped up to 11 or 12 times a day. Abdulla al-Mamun, the director of child protection and child rights governance at Service Civil International Bangladesh, says he receives reports of four or five children being trafficked to the country's largest brothel every month.

Reporting from inside these brothels never gets easier. As lines of men jostle through the entry gates and policemen patrol the brothel streets for signs of drugs or disorder, Papiya and her friends lie on their beds in windowless metal cells and self-harm in a last-ditch attempt at temporary escape.

None of the girls came here consensually. For some, it was their husbands who sold them to the brothels—each man opting to free himself from the constraining role of babysitter in a marriage in which his child wife might feasibly sleep with a teddy bear, and earning about 300,000 taka, \$3,500, in the process. But the majority of the girls shared the same story: like Papiya, they also refused to accept the life of sexual violence and abuse that they found themselves forced into in the name of marriage, and they were willing to risk their lives to escape it.

A few were picked up by traffickers as they attempted to make their way home. Others, like Rupa, Sony, Jinuk, crossed sunken rice fields and railway lines, only to find themselves rejected by their families for the social shame that accompanies a daughter who flees a life of exploitation. Within days, alone at a bus stop or a train station, each girl was approached by a man or woman proffering help and a place to stay for the night. They were drugged and sold to the brothel before they could understand what was going on.

Despite such widespread evidence of child marriage as a precursor to sex trafficking, the connection is consistently overlooked. The Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association

has been working to provide legal assistance and shelter to abused women across Bangladesh since 1979, but staff say they have found themselves struggling to make international donors understand the crossover between underage marriage and modern-day slavery. Funding for their anti-trafficking work has increased since 2017, but little support comes for cases that involve domestic violence or girls who need to flee their marriage.

“It is hard to make our donors see that these problems are all linked,” said Towhida Khondker, the director of the lawyers association. “They are all forms of violence, and one can quickly lead to another.”

One agency with the influence to effect change is the U.S. State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Were they to take child marriage into consideration when assessing human trafficking in Bangladesh, local nonprofit organizations believe countertrafficking initiatives would likely be expanded to target the country’s most defenseless demographic: underage brides.

Since 2001, the United States has purported to hold foreign—often low- and middle-income—countries accountable for failing to adequately implement countertrafficking measures set out by the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act, as established in 2000. It does so through the means of the Trafficking In Persons (TIP) Report—a controversial but vastly influential lengthy annual assessment of the response to trafficking in 187 countries, ranking them across four tiers: Tier 1 being the most successful at countertrafficking efforts, followed by Tier 2, Tier 2 Watch List, and finally Tier 3.

Countries considered not to be making sufficient efforts to combat trafficking are classified within Tier 3 and are subject to sanctions on U.S. aid to their governments, which are theoretically restricted to activities that are unrelated to human trafficking and its root causes. The U.S. State Department is then required by law to work with them to develop a more effective countertrafficking strategy going forward.

This year's report, released in June, saw 21 countries fall within Tier 3, including China, Belarus and South Sudan. For the third year in a row, Bangladesh was assigned Tier 2 Watch List status—a ranking explained in part by researchers as a repercussion of the sudden influx of over a million Rohingya refugees since 2016, and accompanied by 13 recommendations for improvement.

In 18 years of research and assessment, there has never been any mention of child marriage in Bangladesh's TIP profile. Yet the State Department is clearly aware of the implications that early marriage can have on a girl's safety: in this year's report, they referenced child marriage as a contributing factor to girls' vulnerability to sexual exploitation and trafficking in both Syria and Iraq.

Human rights advocates say that if the State Department viewed child marriage in Bangladesh as a form of trafficking or an enabler of trafficking, then it's possible that the country would have received different recommendations, or even a different grade. Were that the case, the incentives for the Bangladeshi government to end child marriage and develop

comprehensive child protection legislation would be considerable.

“The Bangladeshi government takes the TIP report very seriously,” said Liesbeth Zonneveld, the chief of Winrock International’s Counter Trafficking-In-Persons Project, adding that both Bangladesh’s secretary of home Affairs and foreign secretary have already shown a demonstrable commitment to implementing the State Department’s 2019 recommendations. Zonneveld doesn’t know why the United States refuses to consider child marriage as a form of trafficking and to include it in the TIP report accordingly. “The U.S. says there are 25 million global victims of human trafficking, whereas most of us would include forced marriage in that and say there are 40 million,” she said.

Funding for programs that address child marriage as a root cause of trafficking would also be easier to access, said Talinay Strehl, the program manager for the Dutch anti-trafficking nonprofit Free a Girl. “Our donors respect the information included in the TIP Report,” she said. “If we were able to show them that child marriage was referenced, it would probably be easier to get financial support for prevention projects that work with victims of child marriage.” Free a Girl does not currently run any anti-trafficking projects that target girls forced into early marriage, but Strehl acknowledges that they’re a high-risk demographic. “Right now, we just don’t have the resources,” she said.

Until the U.S. State Department acknowledges the role of child marriage in rates of trafficking in Bangladesh, and organizations on the ground are able to incorporate the victims of child marriage into their countertrafficking

efforts, those working with trafficking survivors say girls growing up across Bangladesh will remain trapped at an alarming impasse: stay with your husband and endure sexual violence in the name of marriage, or run away and risk being sold into sexual slavery without hope of escape.