

**SCHOOL CLOSURE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC****Children averse to joining schools****Concerns over rising rate of school dropouts, child marriages**

The rate of child marriage in Bangladesh is on an alarming rise as girls are mostly staying home owing to the closure of educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bangladesh is among top10 countries in terms of child marriage rate. Moreover, the rate of child marriage has increased up to 220 per cent over the period of July-September during the ongoing pandemic. Experts are concerned that the crisis might deepen if there is a further delay in reopening schools.

Speakers came up with the expressions mentioned above in a digital dialogue organised by BRAC today, 11 October 2020, marking International Day of the Girl. Education minister Dr. Dipu Moni joined the dialogue, “Girls must return to schools,” as chief guest.

BRAC executive director (ED) Asif Saleh, Bangladesh Police Women Network (BPWN) president additional commissioner Amena Begum, rights activist and member of parliament (MP) Aroma Dutta, Rasheda K. Choudhury, ED, Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), Prof Dr. Sadeka Halim, Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Dhaka, social development adviser to British High Commission in Dhaka Tahera Jabeen, and Australian High Commission in Dhaka’s first secretary Simon Barclay also joined the event moderated by BRAC director Nobonita Chowdhury.

Education minister Dipu Moni said “We have reached most of our target students in case of digital classrooms. The standard of classes being taken through televisions has increased. Not only the government, but many non-government institutions are taking online classes. So, it is not mandatory that students will have to go to classes. In many countries, schools have been shut after reopening. We need to consider every aspect before deciding on reopening our educational institutions.”

On girl children, the minister said, “The birth registration process is being digitised at union levels. As a result, parents cannot fake their girls’ age and marry them off early. Important topics such as women’s repression, sexual violence is being included in our curriculum. Not only the COVID-19 crisis, we are repurposing our curriculum to tackle all sorts of challenges.”

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BRAC ED Asif Saleh said, “The long closure of schools are forcing our students to forget what they have already learnt. A research in Pakistan shows a five-month closure of schools have forced students backward for 14 months. We need to consider this in terms of our country. Rather than taking a sudden decision, we need constant monitoring to reopen our schools. We can consider reopening schools in districts where the rate of infection is lower. Non-government entities are ready to assist the government in this regard.”

Lawmaker Aroma Dutta said, “Reality must be considered before taking any decision. This is true that we lost a lot during this pandemic. The rate of school drop-out has increased. We need to ensure technological and technical education for students, especially for girls, so that they can ensure their livelihood whenever needed.”

“We, especially our parents, need to change views about our girls. Very often parents force their girls into early marriage. They still believe educating girls would lead to problems for their marriage. We need to change this mentality,” Aroma added.

CAMPE ED Rasheda K. Choudhury said, “School closure has affected both our students and the teachers. This pandemic is acting like a magnifying glass for us. Through this, we can examine all our mistakes and think on our way forward. Before reopening schools, we need to concentrate on the related data and reality.”

She also urged the education minister to introduce incentives in the education sector like other sectors and ensure snacks for students during school hours.

Prof Sadeka Halim said, “Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in women’s empowerment and girl children’s empowerment. If you look at the millennium development goals index, our girls’ enrollment in primary schools was at par with boys. But, child marriage has been instrumental to the drop-out rate of girls.”

“During this covid-19 crisis, we have seen that our education system is closely connected to our livelihood. So, we can’t consider the education system as an isolated phenomenon. We need to think about what can be done for about 43 per cent families who have been forced under the poverty line and these families have a large number of students from schools, colleges and universities,” Sadeka Halim added.

British High Commission’s Tahera Jabeen said, “Schools have reopened in a number of countries. We need a guideline for our children and their families must be included as a stakeholder. The government and non-government and donor agencies must act in this regard”

BPWN’s Amena Begum said, “Many families think what the necessity to educate the girls is. Sometimes parents forcefully marry their girls early. Our conception on what to do was not clear at the beginning of the pandemic. To prevent early marriage people can avail services from police dialing 999. We are working on

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school programmes to make students aware of this. I thank the education minister for including issues like good touch and bad touch in our curriculum.”

Australian High Commission in Dhaka’s first secretary Simon Barclay said, “There is a role for both boys and the men to support the girl children to have a voice in any space—may be at school, or at mosque or temple or in cyberspace. The men and boys need to speak up to support their mothers, sisters or aunts to participate.

“Staying away from schools already increases the risks of dropping out. In terms of learning losses, when the schools reopen, both students and teachers need to intensify their efforts to address the losses. However, their return should not be at the cost of their life, so health issues must be addressed,” Barclay added.

BRAC has been playing an effective role in eliminating child marriage from grassroots to the national level. The organisation has been working as per its founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed’s direction and implementing various projects on its own and in coordination with various government and non-government organisations to eradicate child marriage.

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