

Fikirlah: Child Marriage Must Be Stopped

KUALA LUMPUR (Bernama) -- The World Youth Foundation must be commended for organising the "International Conference on Child Marriage", attended by over 22 countries worldwide.

More than 80 participants thronged Melaka over the weekend, discussing this very sensitive issue. Malaysia, too, was represented by a cross section of participants.

I was shocked and baffled by the data presented during the conference. 15 million girls are married before the age of 18 years; that is 28 girls every minute, one girl in every two seconds. More than 700 million women and over 150 million men already suffer the consequences of child marriage.

If we do nothing, 1.2 billion under aged girls will be married by 2050, with devastating consequences for their girls, their families and their countries.

Child marriage happens across countries, cultures, and religions. It is fueled by gender inequality, poverty, traditions, and insecurity.

It is looked upon differently from one community to the next. India leads the pack with more than 10 million children falling victim to child marriages, followed by Bangladesh (2.3 million), Nigeria (1.2 million), Brazil (888,000), Ethiopia (670,000), Pakistan (600,000), Indonesia (460,000), Congo (290,000), Mexico (260,000) and Nigeria (240,000).

Malaysia has 12,000 cases reported too. The forum discussed the various causes of the child marriage and also agreed that the practice may look different across regions and countries and even within countries.

In many communities where child marriage is practiced, girls are not valued as much as boys as they are seen as a burden to their family. Marrying the daughter at a young age can be viewed as a way to ease economic hardship by transferring this 'burden' to her husband's family.

Child marriage is also driven by patriarchal values and the desire to control or dominate a female, such as how a girl should dress and behave, who she should be allowed to see and to marry; and how she should live and carry herself.

Families closely guard their daughters' sexuality and virginity in order to protect the family honour. Girls who have relationships or become pregnant outside of marriage are shamed for bringing dishonour upon their family.

In some communities, when girls start to menstruate, they become women in the eyes of the community. Marriage is therefore the next step towards giving a girl her status as a wife and mother.

Harmful traditional practices can be linked to each other. In southern Ethiopia for instance, child marriage usually follows the practice of female genital mutilation, which is considered a rite of passage to womanhood.

Traditional practices often go unquestioned because they have been part of a community's life and identity.

More than half of the girls who come from the poorest families in the developing world are married as children. Where poverty is acute, families and sometimes girls themselves believe that marriage will be a solution to secure their future.\

Families may also see investing in their son's education as a more worthwhile investment.

In some cases marriage of a daughter is a way to repay debts, manage disputes, or settle social, economic and political alliances.

In communities where a dowry or 'bride price' is paid, it is often welcome income for poor families; in those where the bride's family pays the groom a dowry, they often have to pay less money if the bride is young and uneducated.

Many parents marry their daughters young because they feel it is in her best interest, often to ensure her safety in areas where girls are at high risk of harassment and physical or sexual assault.

Child marriage can increase in humanitarian crises, such as in conflict or after a natural disaster. When families face even greater hardship, they may see child marriage as a coping mechanism in the face of poverty and violence.

Among the ways to reduce child marriages, first is to empower girls by giving them the opportunity to build skills and knowledge through education thus they can be independent. Economic development programs which provide an alternative for girls who do not have formal education.

This will provide more self-confidence and greater capacity building through the youth groups and community leaders thus creating young people as the agents of change in their own communities.

As one participant from Iran suggested, the best way to overcome this issue is by implementing a law which prohibits a girl from marrying before the age of 18.

It must be made mandatory that no girl should marry before 18 worldwide. Gender discrimination and loopholes in the law with regard to parental consent, the right to own and inherit property, separation and divorce and access to professional services and support are some of the critical issues which requires the attention of all government and the NGO's including the United Nation.

Though globally the rate of child marriages is slowly declining, this is an issue which violates human rights and is an illegal practice which perpetuates poverty.

The longer we wait, the bigger the problem.

The conference proceedings which will be forwarded to the United Nations, will certainly exert greater pressure to relieve the girls from all over the world from this early child marriage syndrome.

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