What about girls?

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EARLIER THIS year, I visited a beautiful village in the hills of Sindhupalchok District and met a smart, if a little shy, 14-years-old girl named Laxmi. She told me about her school and her village two hours away. Two weeks later, I felt a hint of despair when I found out that she was married off. With twenty being the legal age for marriage in Nepal, the wedding was illegal but not a secret. The school staff and Laxmi's friends knew about it and didn't expect to see her often then on—it is absolutely not that she would ever return to school.

Her story is not unique. Bina Kumari, about whom I read last week, shares a similar account: she was married off at thirteen and became a mother at fourteen.

"I will never be allowed to go to school now. Everything has changed," she said. And she was right. Girls who get married off rarely have access to education because of domestic chores they are expected to perform. Everywhere in the developing world, there is a clear correlation: the more prevalent child marriage is, the less years of schooling girls receive.

In its 2011 Annual Report, The Ford Foundation projects that 10 million girls are married globally before they turn 18—the age recognized as the beginning of adulthood under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Their research states that the situation is worst in Nepal, but Nepal ranks as high as 8th on this infamous list. Here, over ten per cent of girls are married off before they turn fifteen, and 51 per cent before eighteen.

Lack of access to education is not the only challenge the child brides encounter. They are twice as likely to become victims of domestic and sexual violence, have no control over their reproductive rights and no power in their new households. Then there are emotional and health risks. Early sexual activity and pregnancy can lead to complications like obstetric fistula and urinary prolapse. Girls under fifteen are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their twenties. It is also dangerous for their infants whose mortality rates are much higher when they are born to adolescent mothers.

There is also the economic status. Girls who marry young are less likely to ever exit the cycle of poverty. Child marriage impacts boys as well, but because of socio-cultural and financial factors and because it is girls who give birth, it affects them disproportionately.

For many years, the issue was neglected by the aid and development community, perhaps because of its sensitive nature. The causes of child marriage include local traditions and cultures, and these can be difficult to talk about and transform. Today, the problem is put on the global agenda and new initiatives have come to life. In 2010, The Elders, founded by Nelson Mandela and other leaders, started the Girls Not Brides campaign. Its goal is to build a network of stakeholders who are working to combat child marriage globally and locally. Last May, the United States Senate unanimously passed the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act. It stipulates that child marriage is a form of child abuse and a violation of human rights, particularly of Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery also specifies forced marriage as a form of slavery.

Despite global efforts, still the future of thousands of Nepali children are decided by adults who negotiate deals in which girls are treated like commodities. They are being transferred, often against their will, from one family to another in a business transaction, maybe as a way to clear debts or as part of local politics. Sometimes, their new husbands are much older strangers. The ceremonies are nonofficial, and there is no record. Often, rural households don't value daughters because after getting married, they move to their husbands' homes and work on their farms. They are seen as a liability rather than assets. Other factors related to child marriage include poverty, traditions like dowry, and discriminy social perceptions, like the stigma attached to women past "marriageable age."

Since being married off in drooping out of school, it is essential to recognize the link between education and economic development. Global research consistently confirms that when girls receive additional years of education, they marry later and have fewer and healthier children. When a girl has access to resources, she reinvests them in her community at a higher rate than boys and men. Studies show that girls' education has a positive impact on health, economy, poverty reduction for themselves and their communities. The link between school retention and Millennium Development Goals is clear.

There are many UNFPA working in Nepal that are addressing the issue. They provide scholarships for girls, conduct girls' and women's empowerment and poverty reduction programs. Nepal Demographic Health Survey 2011 shows some positive trends, as the average age at marriage keeps increasing.

But is this the best we can do for Nepali girls? The progress seems slow. More needs to be done to prioritize the issue: advocacy, legal education on local and national level, law enforcement mechanisms, not only on girls' school enrollment but also on their attendance and retention.

Fifty years ago, Carol Hanisch famously said that "personal is political." Today it is as accurate as ever. A parent's decision to marry off his daughter before she reaches adulthood results in her disempowerment for life. They determine her access to resources and her participation in the public sphere. Each of these individual family decisions, taken behind closed doors, becomes political when we notice the connection between the prevalence of child marriage and the under-representation of women in public debate, social institutions and the government.

I wonder if there are other arguments advocating for early marriage than the two instances I encountered. One states that it's a part of people's traditions or ethnic identities. As much as I believe these things are fundamental. I know, even as a foreigner, there are many other ways to celebrate cultures without violating human rights. Others say that a married girl is safer from potential sexual predators. I reject this argument, because the husband can be an assaulter, too. Most sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows. But more importantly, this pervasive type of harassment should be addressed by effective prevention measures rather than taking away a girl's freedoms. Let's get it straight: It's not girls or women who cause rapes, it's the men who rape them.

So there it happens all the time, every day, to people like Laxmi and Bina Kumari: more than half of the girls in Nepal will be married before they turn 18. These numbers tell us something important. They tell us there is an epidemic in the room—child marriage is a public secret that everyone knows but nobody talks about. It's complex, sensitive, disturbing and messy. But it's time to stop ignoring the problem and start acting if we are serious about Nepal's development and human rights.

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