

Investing in girls, change the world

*(11 July 2016 was World Population Day. Theme of the day was "Investing in teenage girls".
Written by **Mr. Dhiraj Kumar Nath**, this article was published in the Daily Sun on 11 July)*

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh as key note speaker in the Global Women Leaders' Forum held at Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria on 18 May 2016 made a clarion call to global community to work together to create a safer environment for women and girls to act as agents of social transformer. In her speech, she emphasized on strong leadership to empower women and girls and create compatible environment with combined initiatives. She said, "Let's today renew our commitment to make this world a better place for all; a better place for women, where we can live with dignity free from all fear. Join me in saying: We Can Do It."

Prime Minister of Bangladesh received the South –South Awards on 27 September in 2011 for remarkable achievements in the areas of empowerment of women and improvement in child health care. The Prime Minister was highly applauded in the 65 General Assembly of United Nations for commendable successes in the areas of Health and Family Welfare.

To be very specific, successes of Bangladesh were acclaimed round the world for achieving the targets of MDGs, especially in reducing child and maternal mortality, combating the HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases, promoting gender equity and achieving the targets of universal primary education, In achieving the targets of other goals like eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, ensuring environmental sustainability and develop global partnership, Bangladesh is right in track to achieve those targets in time.

In spite of all initiatives, Bangladesh could not make a break-through in eliminating child marriage, violence against women, women trafficking, eve-teasing and harassment of girls while moving in the public transport. The critical area is the negligence to teenage girl about their health, hygiene and empowerment.

To improve social safety and security of teenage girl, Bangladesh must make significant progress by adopting strategic interventions and coordinated efforts. No special policy guideline has been formulated to address the issues of girl child to enable them to grow as future leaders of the nation. It is however, widely believed that investing in teenage girl can contribute much to bring major changes in the society.

A teenager or a teen is a young person whose age is within the range of 13-19 .They are known as teenagers because their age number ends with ‘teen’. Most societies traditionally had a formal ceremony to mark the change from childhood to adulthood and observe puberty socially. During puberty, rapid mental and physical development occurs. Adolescence is the name for this transition period from childhood to adulthood.

In Bangladesh, parents start planning how to get the teen girl married at the age of 12 or above and when she attains puberty .On average, girls begin puberty at ages 10-11 , boys at ages 11-12. Girls usually complete puberty by ages 15-17 while boys complete by ages 16-17. The major landmark of puberty of teen girl is menarche, the onset of menstruation which occurs on average age of 12 -13 years. This is the tragic part of our society that teenage girls are getting married before they reach to 18 years of age sometimes at the stage of puberty.

Main reasons for such early marriage are social security, poverty, poor knowledge of sexuality and inadequate knowledge about complications of early pregnancy. Besides, violence against women, eve-teasing, high demand for dowry etc compel parent to feel anxiety about the marriage of the girl child knowing well about reproductive health complications.

There could be some economic and social measures to combat this alarming situation which could be termed as investing in teenage girls.

In the economic front, there should be some schemes and future investment plan and financial saving strategy by the family. The state can also adopt some measures as Indian government has taken schemes like Sukanya Samridhi Yojna of and Kanya Sri Prakalpa of West Bengal Government. Stipends given by government of Bangladesh to unmarried girls for education are also an effective measure of investment.

Besides saving plans, health issues, especially sexually related complicated are necessary to get solved among teenage girls below 15 years of age. There should be dissemination of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health care, in addition to educate teenage girls to avoid unwanted pregnancy. This awareness building is in fact a real investment.

Teenage and young girls should be properly communicated about the complications of Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Reproductive Tract Infections including HIV/AIDS. There should be proper education about the complications of early pregnancy and danger of premature delivery of children. The early marriage or child marriage and status of malnutrition are alarming.

Almost 65 % girl child are getting married before attaining the age of 18 years in spite of stringent law restricting such a marriage. About 70 % of pregnant mothers suffering from acute anemia giving birth to low weight babies and 60 % of women living in rural areas are suffering from RTI/STI. Besides, working environment of female staff is not adequate with 90 % of work place having no separate toilet for women employees. There is rare any day -care centre in any office, public or private.

In the areas of education, government made the education free for girls up to 12 classes and 1 crore and 72 lakhs of girls students attending in schools and colleges from primary to post graduation are receiving stipends regularly. But the dropout rate in school is high because of poverty, social insecurity etc even after investing much to create greater opportunities for women and girls.

There is no scope to remain indifferent to this area of major concern. The 2016-30 Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (Global Strategy, launched at the Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015) sets out a bold new vision to attain by 2030, "a world in which every woman, girl child and adolescent in every setting realizes their rights to physical and mental health and well-being, has social and economic opportunities, and is able to participate fully in shaping prosperous and sustainable societies."

In order to implement the strategy as set out under the sustainable development goals, there must be more combined efforts and initiatives that might ensure major social change through investing in teenage girls. .

There must be more inclusive investment to improve the situation pertaining to health care of teenage girls and their empowerment with knowledge and voice so that teenage girls can enrich themselves from the early stage of life to play dynamic role to bring social changes, norms and values.

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