

Chicago Tribune

December 8, 2004 Wednesday

The toll of being a bride too soon; Researchers, lawmakers unite to tackle issue of child marriage

By Connie Lauerman, Tribune Staff Reporter

Before they become women, more than 51 million girls in developing countries become wives and mothers.

As a result, they also may become victims of HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, poverty and social rejection.

Growing up in her native India, Geeta Rao Gupta remembers the sight – and stench – of female beggars on the street corners of Bombay. It was years later that she discovered why these women were penniless, social pariahs.

Rao Gupta is president of the International Center for Research on Women, a Washington, D.C.-based research organization that works to improve the lives of women worldwide. She is an authority on the impact of child marriage.

The street-corner beggars Rao Gupta saw were former child brides who had given birth before their bodies were ready for pregnancy and delivery. Long and obstructed labor caused tissue in the birth canal to rupture, resulting in the continual and uncontrollable leakage of feces and urine, a condition called obstetric fistula. Then the young women were thrown out of their homes and communities because of the stigma that accompanies obstetric fistula, Rao Gupta said.

Child marriage also is common in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Parents may view early marriage as a way to protect their daughters from HIV/AIDS, provide for their financial security and ease the burden on a family with many mouths to feed, world health and human rights organization concur.

It also may be a traditional custom or a way to reinforce ties between families or communities. In some cases, the custom persists even when there are laws prohibiting marriage before age 18.

Whatever the reasons for child marriage, “the consequences are negative and lasting” for women, Rao Gupta told a gathering of women at a small fundraising luncheon in Chicago recently.

“Lasting consequences for health, for education and for economic development overall.” After Rao Gupta and her staff presented research about the prevalence of child marriage and its long-term ramifications to Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), he began drafting a child marriage bill aimed at curbing the practice in the developing world.

Durbin is seeking a Republican co-sponsor for the bill, which he hopes to introduce when Congress reconvenes in January, according to his press secretary Joe Shoemaker.

In a speech about child marriage in the fall, Durbin said that “if we are to promote the economic and social development of all the world’s children, we must work to give girls a chance to grow up before they marry.

“I believe that you can tell the most about the potential future of a country by asking one simple question: How do they treat their women and girls? If they hold them back, that country is likely to struggle. If they fully include them and treat them as equals, that country is likely to advance much more rapidly.”

In an interview, Rao Gupta said that child marriage “perpetuates poverty, because when a girl gets married, she gets pulled out of school. She doesn’t have the same economic opportunities as she may have had if she had remained unmarried.

“We have data to prove that educated mothers are more likely to have their own children educated and are more likely to have children who are healthy.”

Early marriage also can expose girls to HIV/AIDS, she said, because girls typically are married to men who are much older than they are. The unequal balance of power means a young, economically dependent wife is less able to negotiate the use of condoms to protect against infection, and may be subjected to violence.

Photos exhibited during the fundraiser bore witness to the impact of early marriage. One woman photographed was Rakiya from Nigeria. She was betrothed at 11, married at 12 and frequently raped within marriage. She delivered her first child two months shy of her 13th birthday.

Rakiya, who had dreamed of getting an education, was widowed at 20, left with five children and a sixth on the way. She sold all of her possessions to feed her children, and then she sold herself until she resolved to find another way. That was selling bean cakes by the side of a road.

Anecdotal information like that puts a human face on the problem of child marriage and underscores the need for political action. Among other provisions, the Durbin bill would direct the secretary of state to develop a comprehensive three-year strategy that would include making delayed marriage among adolescents and the delay of first pregnancy among married adolescents a priority of all foreign-assistance programs focused on adolescent health.

Rao Gupta said a girl who experiences early marriage and pregnancy often is not able to participate fully in society.

“She is not able to feed her children, not able to engage in her community. So you’re reducing the productivity of women in a society and that has a direct impact on the economy of that society. What we are trying to do is encourage economic growth and equity in society and both those things are negatively affected by child marriage.”

Child marriage is both an economic and cultural issue. Some of the world’s industrialized countries once allowed their children to work in factories and marry young.

Dr. Laura Laski, coordinator of the adolescent group at the United Nations Population Fund, or UNFPA, noted that the concept of adolescence evolved in modern developed societies, where females are educated and enter the work force.

“Culture is not a static concept,” Laski said. “It evolves when parents see there are other institutions and places where girls can go and be safe and productive to society.”

UNFPA is working in Bangladesh with community and religious leaders to promote schooling and employment in the garment industry as an alternative to premature marriage.

“[School and work] is a way for daughters to contribute to the income of a family,” Laski said.

Through the presentation of information to communities about the damage child marriage causes, Rao Gupta said, “communities do change their views. You can bring about what we think of as social change.”

- - -

Child marriage by the numbers

- 100,000,000: Number of girls worldwide who will be married before age 18 in the next decade
- 40% of girls in Nepal marry before age 15
- 7% of girls in Nepal marry before age 10
- 50% of girls in Uganda marry before age 18
- 57% of girls in India marry before age 18
- 75% of girls in Bangladesh marry before age 18
- 82% of girls in Niger marry before the age of 18
- 100,000: Approximate number of new obstetric fistula cases among girls annually
- 2,000,000: Number of women suffering from obstetric fistula worldwide
- 6,000: Number of adolescents infected by HIV daily

Source: International Center for Research on Women

E-mail ctc-woman@tribune.com

Copyright © 2004 Chicago Tribune Company.