

# **Is Menstrual Discrimination a Driver for Child Marriage?**

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## **Abstract:**

This study is undertaken to examine the connections between child marriage and menstrual discrimination\* in policies and practices at national, regional and global levels. The four specific objectives are: i) to explore menstrual discrimination in countries which have high numbers of child marriages, ii) to examine the national policies and legal interventions against child marriage and menstrual discrimination, iii) to examine the networks advocating against child marriage with regards to menstrual discrimination, and iv) to assess the global policies and declarations against menstrual discrimination and child marriage. A qualitative approach with secondary resources reviews the issues in Bangladesh, India and Niger, countries that have the highest rate of child marriage. As well as the regional and global networks which are working for ending child marriage, namely South Asia Initiative to End Violence, the African Union and Girls Not Brides. Likewise, this study reviews the major international human right instruments such as Human Right Declaration 1948, Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Girls and Women 1979, Convention of Child Rights 1989 and the United Nations' Sustainable Developmental Goals 2015. The worldwide scope and impact of discriminatory menstrual practices have been omitted from the policies, plans and activities of governments, international organizations and NGOs. Because menstrual discrimination has been used as justification to disempower women in the power structure and patriarchies, women have been left without a voice to negotiate their own human rights, education, and socio economic opportunities. Menstrual discrimination should be openly included in the discussion of the real drivers of early or child marriage.

\* For the purposes of this paper the term 'menstrual discrimination' refers to the discrimination that occurs when prejudice, ignorance and intolerance about the nature of menstruation imposes restrictions, neglect and abuse upon those who menstruate. In this way

negatively impacting their physical, emotional, social, political and economic agency and wellbeing. Expressions of menstrual discrimination are forms of sexual and gender-based violence and represent violations of fundamental human rights.

**Key words:** Menstruation, Menstrual Discrimination, Child Marriage, Human Rights

### **Setting the Context:**

Over half of the population of this planet are born with a uterus and ovaries and will menstruate every month for about 40 years until they reach menopause. The menstrual cycle exists to ensure the reproduction of our species; our human existence pivots on the experience of menstruation in all our female forebears.

Yet there have been a great many theories, myths and cultural practices across the globe and over time that have portrayed menstruation as a curse to be rigorously concealed, with severe stigma attached to menstruating women, justifying all kinds of restrictions and abuse. Through the centuries menstruation has been considered to be dirty, impure, polluting, taboo, dangerous, a clear sign of inferiority and utterly unmentionable. Few scholars to this day explain menstruation as a source of pride, power or celebration, let alone as essential to human existence.

Irrespective of the level of education, religion, region or class, the majority of communities around the world practice discrimination against women during the days of menstruation with differing forms and severity (GSCDM, 2019). Further, the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (GSCDM) (2019) has associated menstrual discrimination with “taboos, stigma, shyness, abuses and restrictions that are associated with menstruation throughout the life cycle of menstruators.” More importantly, menstruation is acknowledged as including complex and multifaceted phenomena and forms of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) and violations of human rights.

Regardless of the underlying causes of menstrual discrimination, it’s presence impacts menstruators in many ways, both immediate and long term, and over the course of their lifetime, that is 365 days of every year. The impact of menstrual discrimination extends beyond the approximately five days of bleeding, and beyond menstrual products or materials and beyond menstrual health. Because of the breadth and depth of the systemic power of patriarchy, the impact of menstrual discrimination is on every level: social, cultural,

educational, health, economic, political, environmental and technological. By patriarchy we mean the socio-political system whereby the male and masculine is preferenced over the female and feminine, which is not specifically about individual men or women, but is a system we all live within and through it's imbalance are disadvantaged by to a greater or lesser extent. Menstrual discrimination plays a role directly or indirectly in many forms of sex and gender-based violence (SGBV), augmenting a spiral or multiplier effect. For instance, due to menstrual discrimination, girls suffer days of interruption to their formal and informal education, which often leads to failures or dropping out of educational opportunities that could have enabled them to have greater career options and greater economic power. Also acquiescence to dictates from their father concerning discriminatory menstrual practices goes on to facilitate early or child marriage (starting as young as age 8 or 9). Because of this the menstruator is vulnerable to various snowballing forms of discrimination, stigmas and violence throughout her life. In other words, menstrual discrimination affects the ongoing physical, emotional, mental and social health of menstruators, and that of their children as well. At the time of writing there is little recognition or acknowledgment globally of the relationship between menstrual discrimination and child marriage, and their profound ongoing impact.

Child marriage is defined as a formal or informal union before the age of 18. Marriage before the age of 18 is considered a human rights violation, mostly affecting girls, and can lead to a lifetime of disadvantage and deprivation. Child brides are at high risk of experiencing poor health, bearing children at young ages which is contra-indicated for their reproductive and general health, dropping out of school, earning less money over their lifetimes and living in poverty (Wodon et. al, 2017). They are also highly vulnerable to intimate partner violence, restrictions on their physical mobility and their agency in general. Besides this, they are disempowered and deprived of their basic rights according to the convention on the rights of the child (Wodon et. al, 2017). Child marriage is a fundamental barrier to the achievement of international commitments for gender equality and is accompanied with a significant and measurable economic development impact (Calimoutou, Liu & Mbu, 2016; International Planned Parenthood Federation [IPPF], 2006).

The determinants of child marriage include the absence of or low education, poverty, harmful practices including female genital mutilation (FGM), traditions of family honor, trafficking, and displacement. Inequitable social and gender norms play an important role in

child marriage, affecting adolescent girls' wellbeing, educational attainment and protection against harmful practices.

Nevertheless, given the adverse implications of COVID-19 on the global economy and since poverty is one of the drivers of child marriage worldwide, cases of child marriages are expected to increase in vulnerable and poor communities, particularly in low-income countries.

### **Objectives:**

1. To explore menstrual discrimination in countries which have high numbers of child marriages;
2. To examine the national policies and legal interventions against child marriage and menstrual discrimination;
3. To examine the networks advocating against child marriage with regards to menstrual discrimination;
4. To assess the global policies, declarations at global level such against menstrual discrimination and child marriage.

### **Rational of the study**

GSCDM claims that there is connection between menstrual discrimination and child marriage. It asserts that the practice of child marriage and its impact on girls is strongly influenced by menstrual, and other related gender-based, discrimination. Although several safeguards have been created through various institutions to prohibit child marriage, its occurrence has not decreased as intended. In order to examine the connection between menstrual discrimination and child marriage, this study is significant and important.

### **Methodology:**

This study employed the qualitative approach where the secondary resources were reviewed, and the facts and information about menstrual discrimination and child marriage were explored. For a selection of countries, the team had chosen the few countries which have highest rate of child marriages. For instance, Bangladesh and India have the highest rate of child marriage in South Asia. In Africa and globally, Niger has the highest rate of child

marriage (UNICEF, n.d). With regards to the networks that are working towards ending child marriage at various levels, the South Asia Initiative to End Violence (SAIEVAC) was established and is operating in South Asia. In Africa, the African Union (AU) for ending child marriage 2013 (facilitated by Girls Not Brides) are working to end child marriage with 55 and 88 members in their networks respectively (Campaign to End Child Marriage, 2013). Girls Not Brides is global network since 2011 which has more than 1500 Civil Society Organizations all around the globe. In order to examine the menstrual discrimination and child marriage addressed in international human rights instruments, the study focused on those most relevant with both themes such as HDR (Human Right Declaration) 1948, CEDAW (Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Child Marriage) 1979, CRC (Convention of Child Right) 1989, and SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) 2015. Despite having about a century of global history of intervention to stop child marriage, child marriage has not decreased as intended despite significant investment. Therefore, further examination is overdue regarding the drivers of child marriage, its consequences, power dynamics between children and parents (UNICEF ROSA & UNFPA Asia Pacific Region, 2019), and progress made, if any.

## **Key Findings:**

### **1. Menstrual Discrimination in respective countries; Bangladesh, India and Niger**

Menstrual discrimination is practiced across the globe with different names, forms and severity (GSDM, 2019). The countries of this study are representative, but not exceptional. The taboos, intimidation, stigma and restrictions towards touching, eating, and mobility are the most common practices. Such discrimination is directed towards menstruators, and can be observed through the communities' attitudes towards menstrual blood, and the things that menstruators touch, eat, see, do or wear.

#### **1.1. Menstrual discrimination in Bangladesh:**

Both visible and invisible, overt and unspoken forms of menstrual discrimination are observed in Bangladesh. The Ritu Baseline Study (2017) cites the following: 76% of girls avoid physical exercise during menstruation; 68% avoid being near men and boys; 96% avoid religious activities; 40% of girls miss approximately three school days during menstruation and one-third perceive that menstrual problems interfere with their school performance; 59% avoid 'white' foods such as banana, egg, milk, and 53% avoid sour foods; and 32% of

menstruating girls do not use the toilet at school when menstruating. Likewise, menstrual discrimination is identified as non-work related stress in the workplace in Bangladesh (Zaman & Mohiuddin, 2021). Similarly, adolescent girls remain absent from school during menstruation due to misconceptions about menstruation, their family's restrictions and inadequate hygiene facilities in school (Alam, et al., 2017). The nominal interventions initiated to address menstrual discrimination, that focus on the availability of pads and other means to manage menstrual hygiene, merely address the most tangible factors but do not address the deep-seated discrimination.

### **1.2. Menstrual discrimination in India**

As in Bangladesh, varieties of visible and invisible forms of menstrual discrimination practiced in India are widespread. In many communities, menstrual discrimination such as restrictions to participation in activities in the kitchen or food preparation, prayers, religious activities, eating citrus fruits, hiding the cloths used during menstruation, are longstanding practices due to considering menstruation as an impure, dirty and polluting event since the times of Vedic writings (Garg & Anand, 2015). Likewise, 52% of girls are kept ignorant of menstruation pre-menarche, and unaware of how it will change their lives. For example, in the states of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, menstruating girls are asked to stay away from religious places, kept in isolation and not allowed to play outside or go to school, which causes them to miss 1-2 days of school per month (United Nations Children's Fund; [UNICEF], 2015). Similarly girls and women are further restricted from participating in both public and private events due to the strong feeling that menstrual blood is unclean or impure or *ganda* (Urdu for dirty) (Rajagopal & Mathur, 2017). Through the government of India and NGOs, there are many efforts to improve attitudes towards menstrual issues but these focus on menstrual pads or hygiene instead of the broader social, economic, political and psychological impacts of menstrual discrimination (Alhelou, Kavattur, Rountree, & Winkler, 2021).

### **1.3. Menstrual Discrimination in Niger**

As in many countries that practice menstrual discrimination, Niger has additional specific injunctions where women are deprived from participation in agricultural activities. Menstruation is unmentionable and considered as a woman's sole and private affair (UNICEF, 2019). Ignorance and silence in regard to menstruation is common where 70% of pubertal but premenstrual girls were unaware of menstruation in the project area of UNICEF (Salamatou Himou 2020). As in other countries, during menstruation, girls and women are

restricted from nutritional, sexual and religious activities (WSSCC, UN Women, n.d). Very few organizations have started to address menstruation in Niger, except regarding menstrual products, as in Bangladesh and India.

## **2. Menstrual discrimination across the national policies and interventions regarding to child marriage in respective countries; Bangladesh, India and Niger**

### **2.1. National policies and interventions in Bangladesh:**

The government of Bangladesh started to abolish child marriage in 1929 (Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, Section 2). “In this Act, unless there is anything repugnant in the subject or context, - (a) "child" means a person who, if a male, is under twenty-one years of age, and if a female, is under eighteen years of age;” However, girls in Bangladesh continue to get married at a very young age. Under the Muslim legal code (Sharia Law), a child under 18 years of age may be given in marriage by a guardian until she or he reaches puberty (Calimoutou, Liu & Mbu, 2016). In 2014, the government of Bangladesh, pledged to eliminate the all kinds of child marriages by 2041. In alignment with this, it drafted the National Action Plan to Eliminate Child Marriage 2015-2021 (Lessons Learned from National Initiatives to End Child Marriage, 2016).

The latest Bangladesh National Strategy for Adolescent Health 2017-2030 does not mention menstrual discrimination and strongly recommends incorporating the topic in to discussions for improving the sexual and reproductive health and promoting human rights (Share-Net Bangladesh, 2020). On the other hand, the interventions around menstrual discrimination are so focused on hygiene that they do nothing to guarantee the dignity of menstruators or accelerate their capacity to gain respect in order to have a voice, to negotiate socioeconomic improvements and to gain sufficient bargaining power to say `no`. Those designing interventions to prevent or mitigate child marriage are yet to acknowledged menstrual discrimination as an important underlying cause of the disempowerment of girls. Both home and school regularly fail to support girls to continue their education or entrepreneurship by pushing them into child marriage.

### **2.2. National Policies and interventions in India:**

In India, the word `marriage`, included under the Indian Majority Action (1875), is defined as including `the capacity of any persons to act in the following matters (namely), marriage, dowry, divorce and adoption` (Calimoutou, Liu & Mbu, 2016). And the Child

Restraint Act (1929), or Sharadha Act, clearly addressed child marriage when it was enacted on 1 April 1930, where the minimum age for a male was 18 years and 14 years for a female. The minimum age for a female increased to 15 years in 1949. The age of marriage increased for both male and female in 1978 to 21 years for a male and 18 years for a female (Child Marriage in India, Wikipedia). In 2006, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, Section 2 described the "child marriage" as a marriage to which either of the contracting parties is a child under 18 years old. Indian courts have ruled that the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act has overriding effect over the provisions of the Muslim Personal Status Law, which allows marriage of a girl child once she attains puberty, which could be as early as 8 or 9 years old (Calimoutou, Liu & Mbu, 2016). In India, of 223 million child brides, 102 million were married before celebrating their 15<sup>th</sup> birthdays (UNICEF, 2020). The child marriage statistics vary from state to state in India though one of every three girls is married off under 18 years of age. Over the long history of child marriage, the link of the practice to menstrual discrimination has been obvious, but most often unspoken.

### **2.3. National policies and interventions in Niger**

Niger has the highest rate of child marriage globally where 3 girls out of 4 are married before the age of 18 and 1 in 4 are married before the age of 15 years (UNICEF, n.d). In the era of the 2030 agenda (Target # 5.3.1), ending child marriage is one of the priorities of the government of Niger and development partners. Therefore a series of activities took place at government, partner and family levels. However, there was no change in child marriage statistics (Save the Children UK, n.d). The policies, activities or anything related to menstrual discrimination is missing across the activities of UNICEF and Save the Children UK. They focus on legal factors, poverty alleviation, addressing social and religious traditions and facilitating the availability of basic public services. Likewise, the absence of menstrual interventions is also missing in UNICEF and Save the Children UK recommendations, which include enrolling and retaining girls in school, promoting girls' skill development, raising awareness, providing economic support, and encouraging relevant laws and policies.

## **3. Menstrual Discrimination across the regional and global networks of child marriage**

### **3.1. South Asia Initiative to End Violence (SAIEVAC):**

SAIEVAC agreed that poverty and lack of economic opportunities for girls are among the highest drivers for child marriage. For the purpose of eliminating child marriage,



SAIEVAC developed 7 indicators and 12 points as calls to action. All were focused on raising awareness of the laws banning child marriage, legal reform and enforcement of the laws. There is no single mention of menstrual discrimination.

### **3.2. African Union for ending child marriage:**

The AU network formed for the purpose of combating child marriage, nonetheless in Africa a girl below the legal age is married off every two seconds. (Study on tradition, religion and child marriage Africa report, 2015). Accordingly, the drivers for child marriage are poverty, tradition, social status quos and gender inequalities. Likewise, this network advised the ways to eliminate child marriage: empower girls, mobilize family and communities, provide adequate health, education, justice and other services and enabling the legal and policy framework. The discussion about menstruation or menstrual practice is absent throughout the AU's policies and activities.

### **3.3. Girls Not Brides:**

Girls Not Brides is a global network for ending child marriage, founded in September 2011 with more than 1500 Civil Society organizations from over 100 countries as members. Its vision urges for equal status of girls and boys but the issue of menstrual dignity remains absent across its six points of mission. All points focus on raising awareness, amplifying the campaign to include policy and finance, and educating on impacts of child marriage. There is no intervention regarding menstrual discrimination.

## **4. The global policies, declarations or human right instruments which are relevant with regard to menstrual discrimination and child marriage**

### **4.1. International Human Rights Declaration (HDR) 1948:**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16: Men and women of full age without any limitations due to race, nationality and religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage during marriage and at its dissolution. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses (OHCHR, n.d., p.5). However, menstrual dignity that would enable "free and full consent" of the parties is not acknowledged by the HDR. For the purpose of this paper we define dignified menstruation as a well-informed and sincere attitude of dignity, respect and understanding in regard to menstruation, where the physical means and environment, the capacity for appropriate health- and self- care, and ample social and emotional support are

considered a fundamental, self-evident right of all women, girls and others who experience menstruation. Dignified menstruation is enabled by comprehensive resourcing and universal, positive menstrual education.

#### **4.2. CEDAW (Convention against Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) 1979:**

CEDAW stands against child marriage through the article 16.1 and 16.2. Article 16 (1) says "States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular, shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women. The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent". Article 16 (2) says "The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory (United Nations, 1979, p.10). However, neither Article recognizes that menstrual discrimination is a cause of child marriage, since the "legal" age is ignored when the girl reaches menarche. A form of menstrual discrimination that is found in some parts of western Nepal includes the traditional, harmful practices of isolation or banishment from the home of the menstruator, which reflects the enduring nature of menstrual discrimination that exists and the ensuing ubiquitous and recurring violence.

#### **4.3. CRC (Convention of Rights for Children) 1989:**

The CRC is the crucial human rights instrument to protect and promote the human rights of children. It does not expressly address child marriage across the 54 articles, however there is some linkage observed for the protection of children in Articles 24 (3) and 34. This is because the CRC expects all of the UN member states to protect all children's rights until they reach the age of 18.

#### **4.4. UN Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) 2015:**

Under SDG 5, target 3.1 refers to child marriage. The UN member states that have issues with child marriage are required to set the targets to eliminate it. With regards to the issue of menstrual discrimination, there is no direct mention, requirement or intervention. However, there are nine Sustainable Development goals (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 12, & 16) out of 17 that assume the abolition of menstrual discrimination: target 1.4; targets 2.1., 2.2; target 3.1, 3.2, 3.7; target 4.1, 4.2; targets 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.5; targets 6.1, 6.2; targets 8.1, 8.5, 8.6, 8.7, 8.8, 8.9; targets 12.4, 12.5; and targets 16.1, 16.2.

## **5.1. Discussion:**

Both menstrual discrimination and child marriage are forms of sexual and gender based violence according to the UN's definition for SGBV. The UN defines SGBV as any act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It is a topic also overlapped with VAC (Violence Against Children), defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to include "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent (s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child".

As menstrual discrimination is a determinant factor for the construction of power and patriarchy and perpetuates the various forms of SGBV in multiplier and systemic ways, it is a violation of all human rights. Deprivation of rights for menstruators cause great harm and cost to individuals, families, communities and governments, including multiple and long lasting consequences for defending rights, providing health and education, promoting productivity and participation of all citizens in public spheres. The daughter who has no self-esteem or has been told that she cannot disobey, oppose, ask the questions, or say 'No' to parents, relatives, teachers or friends imposing menstrual discrimination on her cannot say 'No' to child marriage or forced marriage (Paudel, 2020). There is a close connection between child marriage and menstrual discrimination. The perception, and practices around menstruation play a vital role in enhancing the self-esteem, self-respect, self-dignity and skills such as decision making and negotiating, including when to marry.

### **5.1. Missing the menstrual discrimination discussion across the international human rights instruments which are related with child marriage**

Over the six decades of discussions on human rights, menstrual discrimination is yet to be acknowledged as a violation of the human rights of women explicitly. The HDR 1948 was the first human rights instrument and repeats the word 'dignity.' However, the dignity of menstruators was not mentioned and is not recognized even today. In practice, the organizations which are working to protect and promote human rights remain silent regarding the violation of the rights of individuals who are menstruating. Nothing is done to address the stigma associated with menstrual perceptions and practices. Likewise, the most important instrument for women's rights; the CEDAW 1979, also did not recognize menstrual discrimination on any of its levels: its role in constructing and distributing power in

patriarchal systems; the stigma and pervasive menstrual discrimination practices across the globe, with its different names, forms and severity, many forms of which violate human rights, e.g. in the case of child marriage (GSCDM, 2020). The unequal power relations and gender inequalities impacted by menstrual discrimination form and shape women's self-esteem, access to education, economic opportunity and health care, from childhood. Therefore, the reconstruction of power should start in every home for every child, and should be part of all primary education. However, menstrual discrimination and its impact are absent from CRC 1989. Absent are discussions at home and at school of the natural functions of the human body, and especially the significance of menstruation and the menstrual cycle in ensuring the survival of humankind, and therefore the lives of both girls and boys. Global communities have been moving forward with the slogan, 'Leave No One Behind' since 2015. It is included in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development goals. These goals omit consideration of menstrual discrimination as a complex and multifaceted agenda item that is implicated in order to achieve nine different goals. The silence on menstrual dignity is the silence towards the reality of more than half of the population of this planet. More importantly, the practice of child marriage has not changed despite over a century of interventions in specific countries and about half a century in the UN. These interventions have covered many facets that drive child marriage but have not recognized the intrinsic biological phenomena of menstruation and the perceptions and practices around it.

## **5.2. Missing action to end menstrual discrimination across the policies and plans of child marriage**

Initiatives designed to ban child marriage began in 1929. The UN started to work on child marriage under the theme of traditional harmful practice since 1970/1980 (ICRW, 2011). Targeted programs increased from 1990, and were accelerated by international conferences such as ICPD 1994 and Beijing 1995. Since then, the drivers identified as responsible for child marriage, such as poverty, tradition, safety or social norms and gender inequalities, have failed to draw the key connection to menstrual discrimination. The complex and multifaceted nature of menstrual discrimination is heavily ignored and missing. Likewise, the activities against child marriage are focused on engaging communities, families, policy makers, faith healers and so on, enhancing the purchasing power of parents, developing the skills of girls, providing incentives for parents to educate girls, reducing the violence at school, and fostering the legal and policy framework. These activities are all very good and important, but do not expose the underlying cause of why girls are relegated to a

status that is inferior, powerless, voiceless, dehumanized, unclean and unworthy. To put it simply, there is no discussion about menstrual discrimination and its role in SGBV, including child marriage. An important element in the elimination of child marriage is girls' education, a resultant well-informed confidence in their bodily autonomy and understanding their options other than childbearing. With this confidence girls will be better able to strategize and negotiate their role in the family and community and appreciation of the personal and community value of their options will grow.

### **Conclusion:**

Menstrual discrimination and child marriage are intrinsically linked with each other. Menstrual discrimination is a direct cause of child marriage. Both are the result of the imbalance of power and gender inequality inculcated into girls since childhood, that is constructed and shaped by the stigmas and discriminatory practices that disempower menstruators. In order to reframe the attitudes and behaviors of all members of society, the interventions for ending child marriage should be initiated in early childhood where the dialogue on equal rights among all persons should include equal opportunity and menstrual dignity. Because the ages between 6-12 years are recognized as very crucial for children to understand their own selves and build self-esteem, these years form the base for lifelong learning (Donald, et al., 2019). The interactions with family, school, and peers are key factors for learning and adapting to the social norms, and require a positive, consistent, supportive environment (Sørli, Hagen, & Nordahl, 2020). This is the 'age of reason' where children develop new capabilities, are assigned roles and responsibilities, develop logical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving (NCBI, 2021). The long lasting cognitive and emotional effects depend on the environment, including the levels of nutrition, stress, stimulation, and social interaction (The Lancet, 2007). In this context, menstrual dignity has a significant role to play in creating an equal sense of power and opportunity among girls and boys, including agency and confidence regarding their bodies. Menstrual discrimination is one of the important contributing factors that fuels child marriage or forced marriage, along with other factors; poverty, insecurity and gender inequality (Girls Not Brides, 2021). However, no significant study has taken place as yet to change the narrative and expose the link between menstrual discrimination and child marriage. Only the GSCDM has recognized the underlying power construction among girls and boys where girls become the victims, including through child marriage, and boys become the perpetrators (Paudel, 2020). Following the decades of failed interventions to abolish child marriage and the centuries of

undermining women's rights and stigmatizing menstruation, it is urgent that more research is undertaken to expose the link between these two issues.

There are different international laws to ensure the rights of each citizen and a Sustainable Development Goals road map for each country to ensure “Leave No One Behind”. But, there are still cultural norms and practices which directly restrict girls' activities and opportunities during menstruation, in all social and cultural settings, because they are labeled untouchable, unclean and unworthy persons during menstruation. This deeply impacts girls' resilience and self-worth. Schools are not motivated or equipped to include dignified menstruation at primary level education and school management committees and teachers do not seriously try to expose the stigma or disallow discrimination at school. Thus, school girls are very often compelled to be absent from school during menstruation, and in this way are treated as unequal to boys, dehumanized or degraded by teachers and classmates. Such circumstances directly impact girls' quality of education and quality of social life. Girls that cannot compete with boys or complete their education cannot be resilient and make effective and empowered decisions. Family and society make decisions for her, even unwittingly. In this situation, girls are compelled to marry, but this status does not protect them from the ongoing menstrual stigmas imposed by society and family throughout a girl's menstruating life.

The national, regional and global level strategies, action plans and campaigns that intensively and directly address child marriage omit mention of one of the driving forces of the power dynamic that perpetuates child marriage: menstrual discrimination. The issue of menstrual discrimination needs to be urgently considered and included in all strategies, action plans and advocacy to abolish child marriage.

### **Recommendations:**

- ✓ Child marriage is complex issue that deprives a person of their human rights and therefore stand-alone interventions are not effective for ending the practice. Menstrual discrimination should be included as one of the key drivers for child marriage.
- ✓ The dialogue on dignified menstruation<sup>1</sup> at home, in schools and communities is important for exposing traditional stigmas around menstrual discrimination and child

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<sup>1</sup> Dignified Menstruation is a holistic and innovative approach. For details see [www.dignifiedmenstruation.org](http://www.dignifiedmenstruation.org)

marriage simultaneously. The dialogue is important starting at home and in primary schools so that the concept of dignified menstruation becomes an integral part of socialization processes and community building.

- ✓ As in Nepal, the state needs to develop policies and laws to effectively tackle menstrual discrimination, promote menstrual dignity and ensure that these instruments are enforced.
- ✓ Multiple conventions, treaties, and international agreements exist to protect children from early marriage and social inequality and discrimination. These conventions and treaties need to address the stigma against menstruation.
- ✓ Menstrual discrimination and child marriage need to be understood as intrinsically linked in the global discourse on human rights, specially during the development of progress reports such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), CEDAW report and CRC.



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