

BELINDA STRONACH

G(irls) 20 Summit aims to give voice to 10 million child brides

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When the second annual G(irls)20 Summit got under way Tuesday, each of the 21 delegates stood up and finished the sentence "I am here because ..." Answers ranged from acting as a voice for women around the world to questioning the lack of women working in science.

Conceived by The Belinda Stronach Foundation, the four-day meeting on empowering young women selects one student from each of the countries represented by the G20 plus one additional girl from the African Union and takes place ahead of the G20 summit next month.

Sudhir Shetty from the World Bank, Canadian singer Jann Arden and American actor Forest Whitaker are among the speakers who will discuss political, economic and social issues that the girls will use as the basis for a communiqué to be presented to G20 leaders. Mabel van Oranje, chief executive of The Elders, an independent organization of global leaders chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and spearheaded by Nelson Mandela, will address the issue of child marriage. By phone from London, the human-rights advocate and wife of Prince Friso of the Netherlands said child marriage is a large-scale problem that not only violates girls' rights but also prevents economic growth in impoverished regions.

Child marriage has been happening for centuries but only recently has it become a voiced concern. How serious is it?

Here's an issue affecting 10 million girls a year who are getting married before the age of 18 and no one is talking about them. It's a gross violation of human rights, but also, the consequences for them and their families and communities are enormous. They are pulled out of school and never allowed to go back so the ability to earn a decent living is impeded. And then they become of little economic value. Their value becomes their fertility – giving birth at the ages of 12, 13, 14. They are forced to deliver babies with their tiny bodies. If they don't die during childbirth, their children are more likely to be ill or die in their first year. And then they lead isolated lives. So ultimately, this means that child marriage is a driving force of poverty.

Why does child marriage remain widespread?

It's a matter of tradition; this has happened generation after generation. And that's what is making it so hard to change – and also to discuss – because it's easy to be accused of cultural imperialism. But if Archbishop Desmond Tutu or [ex-UN chief] Kofi Annan are talking about it, no one can tell them to stay out of it. As Elder member Graca Machel says, traditions are made by people so they can be changed by people. There are places in the world – Senegal and parts of India – where the process is changing on a grassroots level. But this doesn't happen when the outsiders say it's wrong; it happens from within the culture. Legislation is not a guarantee against child marriage. As another example, female genital mutilation is still prevalent, even with laws.

In many places, tradition and social norms are much stronger than laws – which doesn't mean laws shouldn't exist. But in India the legal age for marriage is 18 for girls and 21 for boys; and yet one out of three child marriages happens in India. So laws don't mean much gets implemented. There needs to be both judicial implementation and implementation from the communities based on their social norms.

What happens when the issue gets framed in economic terms? Do communities listen then?

That's when they realize it's not in their interest to continue. A woman who earns money reinvests 90 per cent back in her family while men direct 30 or 40 per cent back to their family. There is real benefit to investing in girls. If you want to break the cycle, a girl who is able to finish school at 16 or 18 and hasn't had a child until later in life and is not forced to marry – the chances are that she will let not her own children marry before 18. Some people think you can never change tradition. That's how people felt about foot binding in China. But that changed in one generation. I think the same can happen – once you get the current generation in school and out of marriage. They will never do it again to their own children. And then think of the economic benefits.

BELINDA STRONACH

You can't attempt to solve this issue without addressing how men factor into it.

These kinds of things – whether child marriage or female genital mutilation – cannot change unless you get the whole community on board. Men remain role models. Former president of Brazil, Fernando Cardoso, spoke out against domestic violence in Latin America. When he says to a macho culture, “It’s just not cool to beat up your wife,” that has a lot of resonance. Let me be clear that religion is not driving child marriage – no single religion says that girls should marry before 18 – yet religious leaders are often performing the marriages or are not standing up against them. So when Archbishop Desmond Tutu says he’s shocked that the practice is so widespread on his continent, he’s giving it some attention and that’s very powerful. Unfortunately, this still means men listen better to men than women. As they say in China, women hold up half the sky. So how come in parts of the world, half the sky is not being held up?

What do you hope might be the trickle down from speaking at the G(irls) 20 Summit?

We need to take the taboo factor away; we need to make this an issue that is recognized and spoken about so that the 10 million girls actually become visible. In terms of policy and funding, we’re not talking about a lot of money. If a donor is already running an education program, why not have an element that looks at why so many girls drop out of school? So you have to look at the development dialogue. These amazing girls can play a role in helping to discuss the issue in their own communities; they can do a lot in terms of being spokespeople.

Does empowerment work?

If a girl is nine years old and her mother tells her she will get married tomorrow, it’s hard to stand up against that. But there are now peer groups who, on finding out a girl is getting married, alert teachers or authorities. So empowerment works.

How would you like to see the private sector involved?

The private sector needs to acknowledge that development is not just giving money but acknowledging that change in social norms is important. We are exploring which kinds of companies could play a bigger role in this. Obviously communication companies have and continue to help.

Once the Elders have focused on the issue for a year, then what?

We’re definitely keeping this on our agenda for more than a year. You don’t change a tradition like child marriage in a two-year funding cycle. We can see where The Elders can add more value. The Elders cannot add value on ground. I believe they can add value as far as the visibility it deserves and acting as an incubator for partnerships like with the creation of GirlsNotBrides.org. The Elders can try to engage in more dialogues with traditional and religious leaders and then other leaders can have more influence in changing practice. Imagine if we got a bunch of Bollywood stars on board?

Child marriage is not explicitly addressed in the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals but it is certainly implied in many of them, especially Goal Three: “Promote gender equality and empower women.” What must be done before the target date of 2015?

Because child marriage directly affects six of ten Millennium Development Goals – maternal health, infant health, eradicating poverty – I think unless we acknowledge that child marriage is a factor, it will be hard to achieve them. It is necessary to take a comprehensive approach when tackling MDGs, in the same way that when you build schools you make sure there are teachers who then make sure a nine-year-old girl is not pulled out to get married. Or that if want to stop spreading HIV/AIDS, you don’t want 14-year-old girls married with men twice their age who have been around and bring HIV into marriage. Women, because of their inferior status, can’t negotiate safe sex. You get the idea here that if we want to reach MDGs and make progress, we cannot ignore the issue of child marriage, even though it is very difficult and sensitive. The reasons are complex, the symptoms are not easy, but complexity cannot be a reason to ignore 10-million girls and tell them, we don’t care about you.

Who arrived at the 10 million number?

That is the number the UN is using. Interestingly, because until recently this was not recognized as a prominent issue, the data collection was poor. So with funding allocations and policy, we will also get better data. I will be first one to be delighted if that number is a couple million less. But regardless, it’s just such an outrageous number.

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Is progress measurable?

I think we're going to count villages, districts, regions where they say they are not doing this any longer. And then we want to make sure more marriages are registered and births are registered. But also, we will see it in the decline of school dropouts.

So are you optimistic that this can be significantly reduced?

Absolutely. I really only learned about this 20 months ago and the Elders decided to take it on 16 months ago. So you can see a lot can be done in a little time. Laws on their own do not necessarily do the trick, just like Bollywood stars do not do the trick. If you want to see real change happen, change is required on multiple levels. The Elders stimulate that to happen and create the space to show that change is possible and for those who want to be part of that space. We are the enablers; others will be the change makers.

Just as a parallel, I'm 31 and unmarried with no kids. What would be the status of a thirty-something who's been married for 20 years?

I met a girl in Ethiopia who was in her early 20s and already had four children. So by the time a girl reaches her 30s – if she survives the multiple childbirths – let's be honest, she might even be a grandmother. Physically, she would still be giving birth but she could also have grandkids.