Justice Imman Ali Speaks on Child Marriage in Bangladesh

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Bangladesh has the third-highest rate of child marriage in the world. Its population is also among the world’s most impoverished. According to the Honorable Justice Imman Ali of the Bangladesh Supreme Court, the two problems are intimately related. “Child marriage leads to poverty, and that poverty leads to more poverty,” he asserted in a September 30 lecture at the Law School.

Ali’s lecture, “Child Marriage in Bangladesh: A Harmful Traditional Practice,” was presented by the Berger International Studies Program and the Avon Global Center for Women and Justice, in whose work Ali has previously participated. Says Muna Ndulo, Professor of Law, Director of the Institute for African Development, and a member of the Avon Global Center’s steering committee, “Justice Ali addressed a very important challenge of our time: how to ensure that the girl child is protected and that child marriages are ended world-wide.”

Speaking before Law School students and faculty, Ali laid out his view of the causes and consequences of the practice in Bangladesh, where it affects girls as young as six. He cited custom, poverty, and lack of information among its motivations. Another factor, he said, was the prevalence of sexual assault, which leads many parents to deem the protection of their daughters’ chastity prohibitively burdensome.

Child marriage, said Ali, is disastrous for the welfare not only of the wedded girls but also of the country as a whole. Young brides are exposed to physical and sexual abuse, endure high-risk pregnancies, and are denied access to school or job training. Isolated and disenfranchised, they commonly lack the resources and motivation to educate their own children, perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

The most important means of breaking this cycle, Ali concluded, is education. In his position on the Supreme Court, he has advocated mandatory primary education, as well as economic incentives for parents to send their children to school. Most crucial for changing attitudes toward child marriage, he believes, is informing the girls themselves of its hazards. He expressed optimism in the ability of girls to slowly but surely influence their parents. Asked about the role of technology, he also noted a recent trend: Girls who face marriages are using text messages to alert their friends, who then contact police to intervene.

The Avon Global Center for Women and Justice works with judges, legal professionals, and governmental and non-governmental organizations to improve access to justice in an effort to eliminate violence against women and girls. The Berger International Legal Studies Program sponsors a varied and indispensable array of activities that provide Cornell Law students with legal
training and skills of global relevance.

--Owen Lubozynski