



Perspective

Exploring the socioeconomic factors behind girl child marriage in India

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Abstract

Child marriage has been a persistent problem in India. Child marriage is deeply rooted due to traditional, cultural, and religious practices, which have made it difficult to combat. Girl child marriage is an issue that can create several other problems among children, such as sexual abuse, juvenile justice, reproductive & sexual health, psychosocial & mental health, nutrition, protection, education, opportunities, and livelihood. Marriage of a girl child is frequently associated with problems such as the practice of dowry and the prevalence of child widowhood. Moreover, it results in unfavourable outcomes such as malnutrition, inadequate maternal health, and high fertility rates, and contributes to the problem of overpopulation. The aim and objective of this paper are to understand the factors behind child marriages and their impact on the girl child. The limitation of this paper is to cases related to girl-child marriages in India only. The finding of this paper focused on three key issues; how to improve the interaction between parents and child, social norms and culture, and gender socialization practices to combat girl-child marriage in India.

Keywords:

Child-marriage, Poverty, Illiteracy, Social norms, Implementation

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Introduction

The increasing prevalence of child marriage in India can be attributed to several social and economic factors, such as an outdated mind set among the older generation, parents with limited education, traditional cultural practices, and weak social ties. Girls are often viewed as the property of their future husband's family from birth, leading to a weak social bond between the girl child and their

parents. In the Indian system, parents have authority to arrange daughters' marriages and make all decisions regarding their daughters' lives, including education and marriage.^[1] Parents tend to avoid educating their daughters too much, fearing it will make finding a suitable husband more challenging. As a result, girls often handle household chores alongside their mothers and are not allowed to object to child marriage. Parents justify child marriage to protect family values and avoid the potential negative effects of delaying marriage. Not marrying off their daughter at a young age is perceived as a loss of social status and an additional financial burden for the family.^[2] All the above-discussed factors have reduced parents' interactions with the girl child. It is also observed that due to poverty and poor economic conditions, parents are unable to interact with their children, which increases girl-child marriage among poor parents.

As per the UNICEF report published in 2020, India contributes the highest number of child marriages in the world, with 223 million child brides accounted one-third of the global total percentage.^[3] Child marriage has profound and long-lasting effects on children and adolescents, with irreversible impacts on their health, education, opportunities, and livelihoods.^[4] It places them at heightened violence, exploitation, and abuse, affecting overall development.^[5] While child marriage impacts both genders, girls are impacted to a greater extent due to strongly established gender norms. Across the globe, the occurrence of child marriage among boys is only one-sixth of that among girls.^[6] Moreover, the adverse effects of child marriage are harsher and more enduring for girls as compared to boys. These effects may include early pregnancy, increased risks of maternal and neonatal mortality, educational setbacks, limited employment opportunities, and a higher likelihood of being subjected to violence and abuse.^[7]

In India, the legal age for women to get married is 18, and for boys is 21, and it is not legal for girls to get married before 18.^[8] However, around 1.5 million girls before completing their 18 years of age get married every year. Shockingly, almost "16% of adolescent girls between the ages of 15-19 are currently married in India".^[9] A recent survey, the District-Level Household and Facility Survey (DLHS), has found that in rural areas, nearly 48% of women between the ages of 20-24 got married before the age of 18, compared to 29% in urban areas. National Family Health Survey 2019-21 (NFHS-5) shows that over the past few years, there has been a decrease in the percentage of women between the ages of 20 and 24 who got married before turning 18, declining from 27% to 23%.^[10] But all such initiatives are not sufficient to prevent the continuation of early child marriages.^[11]

Theoretical approach

The Social Ecological Model was founded by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner proposed a range of factors at multiple levels, including the individual, the family, the community, and the broader society.^[12] He argued that these factors interact in complex ways and shape individual behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs. The Social Ecological Model has become a widely used framework in public health and community development. This model is used to examine multiple factors which is the reason behind girl-child marriage in India. Also, through this model, child marriage can be understood as a result of the interaction between multiple individual factors, such as poverty, illiteracy, social norms, and insecurity, as well as economic and political factors.^[13] The fundamental concept of the socioecological paradigm involves the examination of social connections and arrangements within a particular social context, as represented by the "microsystem (social interaction) and macrosystem (social structure)".^[14] Bronfenbrenner's work has

explored the social interaction and structure within this socio-ecological framework.

Factors for girl child marriage in India

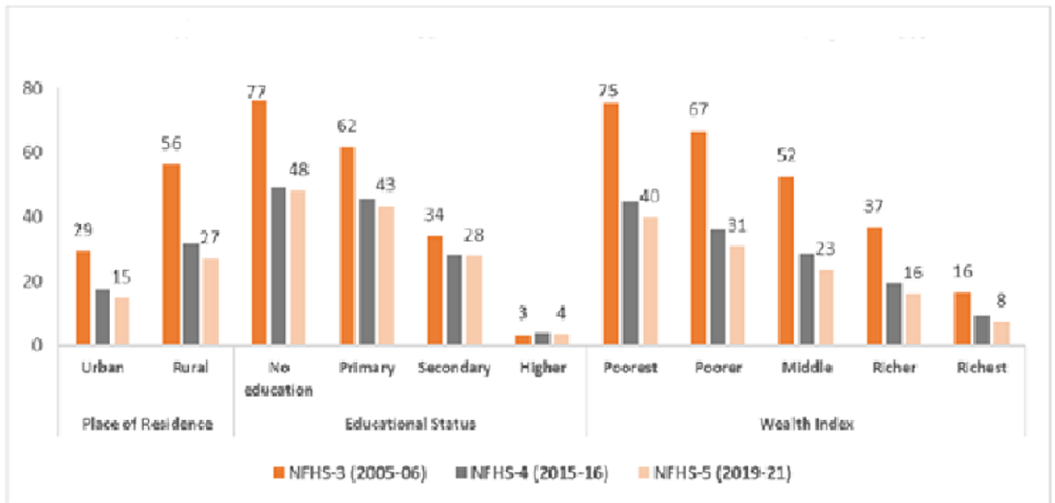
There are several factors that increase child marriage in India, like poverty, illiteracy, social norms, insecurity, and lack of programme and policy, ineffective implementation.

Poverty: Poverty in India can be defined as the lack of access to basic human needs, including food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare, essential for a healthy and productive life. According to the World Bank, poverty in India can also be measured in terms of income, with individuals earning less than \$1.90 per day living in extreme poverty.^[15] While examining India’s social and economic structure, it is found that a large section of India’s population still lives in poverty, and family members agree to child marriage because they are unable to afford the dowry. Many poor

parents agreed that underage daughters were married to the proposal of anyone who did not ask for a dowry. The belief exists in Indian society that if brides are younger, they have to pay a smaller dowry amount as they are perceived as more compliant and adaptable to the expectations and customs of the household and are therefore less likely to oppose them. According to a report by Girls Not Brides, It is more probable for impoverished families to arrange marriages for their daughters at an earlier age.^[16] In many cases, families see the marriage of a girl child as a way to alleviate economic pressures and secure their daughter’s future. Furthermore, poverty limits access to education and healthcare, exacerbating the risks associated with early marriage.

Illiteracy: Child brides often increase drop out of school, which limits their opportunities and exposes them to early marriage and pregnancy. Without access to education,

Figure 1: Percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married before 18 years of age by place of residence, education, and wealth in India, (NFHS-3,4, & 5)



younger girls may not understand the importance of delaying pregnancy or how to take care of their health during pregnancy. According to a study by the International

Center for Research on Women (ICRW), “Girls without education are three times more likely to marry before the age of 18 than those who have completed secondary education”.^[17]

Lack of education increases several health issues, such as maternal health and early pregnancy, including mental and psychological issues. In many parts of India, particularly in rural areas, girls and their families may not fully understand the dangers and negative consequences of early marriage due to illiteracy. They may also not be aware of their legal rights, including the minimum age of marriage. According to the National Family Health Survey 2019-21 (NFHS-5), “48% of girls with no education were married below 18 years of age as compared to only 4% among those who attained higher education”.^[18]

Social norms: In India, people are following certain social norms from ancient times, which are still prevailing in society due to a lack of education, advocacy, and awareness. Community in response to performing old age orthodox and conservative norms to demonstrate their belongingness to the society, to comply with social pressure or the influence of those in power, or simply because it's a familiar practice. However, social norms are often biased towards gender and are designed to control the sexuality of girls and women while also perpetuating age-old customs. Girl child marriage is a prevalent example of such a practice, and it has been occurring for generations in many parts of the world. In certain cultures, a girl's transition into womanhood is marked by her first menstrual cycle.^[19] Following this, the next step towards gaining social status as a wife and mother is often seen as a marriage. Marriage of a girl child is viewed as a traditional custom normalized and accepted by many communities.

Gender inequality: Even after 76 years of Indian independence, the patriarchal nature of society in India restricts girls and women from making any decision in their own lives. Parents are still the sole authority to decide the future of girl children. Even after the marriage, they may not have the power to negotiate with their husbands about contraception or family planning, leading to early and unintended

pregnancies. According to a report by UNICEF, “child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and the social norms that perpetuate it”.^[20] Discrimination against women in India is carried from ancient times and still prevails in society due to their unequal status. In Indian society, girls are seen as a burden and an economic liability as they are expected to leave their families and move in with their husband's families after marriage. In such situations, families often view early marriage to reduce the financial burden of raising a daughter and to ensure her safety and security in the future.^[21]

Insecurity: Incidence of child marriage rises in times of natural calamities or crises. Situations arising from conflicts, widespread violence, and natural disasters like drought, flood and disease outbreaks, hunger, and poverty exacerbate the factors that promote child marriages. Family members perceive child marriage to deal with escalating financial difficulties. Parents conduct their daughter's marriage believing that it will safeguard them against heightened or generalized violence, including sexual assault. Displacement leads to the breakdown of support systems and social networks, rendering girls more susceptible to child marriage. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that “nearly 24 million children and adolescents, including 11 million girls and young women, may drop out of school due to the pandemic's economic impact”.^[22] There is concern that the financial difficulties resulting from both the lockdown and cyclones may lead impoverished parents to contemplate marrying off their underage daughters to men who don't require dowries.

Child marriage legislation in India

For the first time, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA), 1929/Sarda Act: restricted child marriages in India, but at that time minimum age of marriage for girls was 14 years and for boys was 18 years. After the Indian independence, CMRA was amended in 1949 which minimum age of marriage was raised for girls to 15 years.

Another reform in the CMRA was made in 1978 in which the minimum age of marriage was raised for girls to 18 years and for boys to 21 years, which is still valid.^[23]

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) of 2006 completely forbids child marriages, setting the minimum marriage age for girls to 18 and for boys to 21. The PCMA also designates child marriage as a punishable offense, which is both cognizable and non-bailable.^[24] Offenders may be incarcerated for up to two years or fined up to INR 1,00,000. Despite these strict measures, the effectiveness of the law in ending child marriage in India has been limited. The practice continues to be widespread in many regions of the country. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, defines a child in India as someone below the age of 21 if male and 18 if female. The act further invalidates any marriage between minors who fall below the age limit set by the law. The legislation also imposes penalties for several violations, including allowing or conducting a marriage between two minors or between minors and adults.

Girl child marriages and the response of state

Out of all the states and union territories in India, Karnataka had the highest number of cases registered under the PCM Act between 2011 and 2021, with 849 cases, accounting for over 19% of all cases reported. Tamil Nadu (649) and West Bengal (619) had the second and third-highest numbers of cases, while Assam reported 596 cases. These four states together accounted for more than 59% of all cases reported during the same period. Additionally, Maharashtra, Telangana, and Haryana reported more than 200 cases each, and when combined with the top four states, contributed to 75% of all cases reported. Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Gujarat, Kerala, and Bihar also reported over 100 cases each. Collectively, these 12 states accounted for more than 90% of all cases registered between

2011 and 2021.^[25] United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) have extended their technical assistance in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of social protection programs to combat child marriages in India. UNFPA and UNICEF have initiated several programmes with several states such as Kanyashree (West Bengal), Mukhya Mantri Kanya Utthan Yojana (Bihar), Mukhyamantri Sukanya Yojana (Jharkhand), and Kanya Sumangla Yojana (Uttar Pradesh), to ensure that underprivileged girls have access to education, skills-based training, and opportunities for career development.^[26] Furthermore, the technical support offered to the district task forces with the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) initiative has been reinforced and made more enduring and collaboration with civil society networks, resulting in greater utilization of funds.^[27]

UNFPA and UNICEF have formed a robust partnership and cooperation in Odisha at the state level. Since 2019, both organizations have been involved in the state steering committee for multisectoral convergence on the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act and the State Action Plan. Through this collaboration, they have established the ADVIKA adolescent program and provided training to important government officials on adolescent empowerment and ending child marriage in the state. The program was launched in Odisha, and a social media campaign was conducted across various platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to raise awareness about the themes covered by the program. Odisha state has made several efforts to enhance the learning environment in 1,730 residential schools to ensure that schools are more student-friendly and they are getting technical assistance to reinforce the life-skills program. Odisha state budget allocation to implement the state action plan was increased from US\$100,000 in 2019 to

US\$50 million in 2020.

Assam received assistance from UNICEF to create a thorough strategic action plan to implement a multisectoral approach to stop child marriage in the state. The action plan was developed based on six dimensions - political support, policies, governance, human rights, accountability, access, and participation - customized to cater to the specific needs of 17 critical districts. The objective was to guarantee the successful implementation of the plan. The Assam police launched a special drive in 2023. They arrested more than 3,000 individuals involved in child marriages under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2012. The police said that “they have registered 4,235 cases and identified 6,707 accused. Out of the 3,047 arrested individuals, 93 are female and 2,954 are male”.^[28] The State Government of Gujarat launched a strategic action plan to end girl child marriage, which includes a commitment of US\$700,000 towards generating awareness about the plan, conducting community outreach and campaigns, developing information and communication materials, and providing skill-based training to combat girl child marriage.

In Madhya Pradesh, a state action plan was developed to empower adolescents while focusing specifically on fighting and end child marriage-related violence. This plan was created with the support of various stakeholders, including government bodies, NGOs, and other civil society organizations. The plan was designed to be comprehensive and incorporate a range of sectors, including health, education, child protection, and women’s empowerment, among others. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) played a critical part in the creation of the Rajasthan State Policy for Women 2021, which was a collaborative effort with the Directorate of Women Empowerment and involved consulting with various stakeholders and rep-

resentatives from marginalized communities. The policy was designed to focus on the holistic empowerment of girls and women and to address a wide range of issues affecting their lives.

The state of Uttar Pradesh in India has taken concrete steps towards addressing girl child protection and adolescent empowerment. One such initiative is the formation of functional district task forces in all 75 districts of the state. These task forces are responsible for planning, implementing, monitoring, and reviewing the progress of the “child protection and adolescent empowerment program based on the state action plan”.^[29] The district action plans aim to address issues related to masculinity, gender-based violence (GBV), and child marriage. UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) has been working closely with the Government of Karnataka and civil society organizations to combat child marriage in the state. One of UNFPA’s key roles has been to provide technical assistance and support in the development and implementation of the state’s strategic action plan to end the girl-child marriage. Additionally, UNFPA has worked with civil society organizations to promote the rights of adolescent girls and advocate for policy and legislative changes to end girl child marriage. UNFPA has supported the establishment of networks of advocates, including youth-led organizations, to raise awareness and advocate for the rights of adolescent girls.

In Tamilnadu, seven key areas were identified to enhance the execution of certain actions, which include political support, education for adolescents, provisions for adolescent-friendly water, sanitation and hygiene, improvement in adolescent health and nutrition, safeguarding children, and eradicating child marriage. In West Bengal, UNICEF and its partners aided districts in collecting and analyzing the SAG-Kanyashree Prakalpa District Monthly Progress Report. This allowed for progress tracking, gap

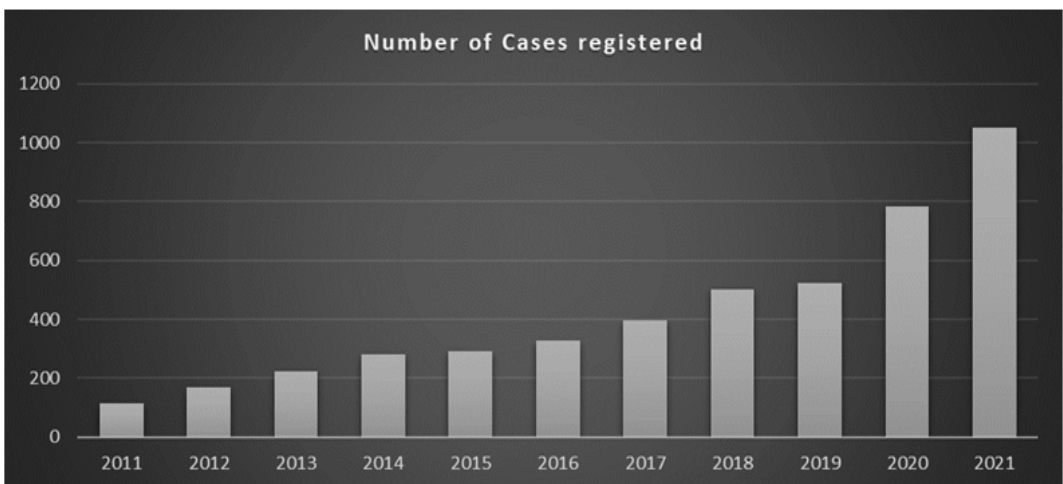
identification, and required adjustments. By analyzing the District Level Monitoring Reports (DMPRs) of all 23 districts, the Department of Women and Child Development conducted a review meeting at the state level. This allowed them to evaluate the efficiency of the process and make any required modifications.

COVID-19 and its impact on girl child marriage

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a rise in child marriages, primarily due to five factors. These factors include economic instability, interrupted education, restricted access to social services, inadequate access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, and the loss of parents. These factors are interconnected and operate in diverse ways. Due to the government-imposed lockdown, over 120 million Indians lost their jobs by May 2020, leading to economic insecurity that forced some parents to turn to child marriage to alleviate poverty.^[50] Poverty and limited household resources also increase the risk of child marriage. School and community center

closures cut off children from their support systems and formal legal systems, limiting their ability to communicate and report incidents. Additionally, the pandemic disrupted access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, leading to unintended pregnancies and subsequent child marriages. COVID-19-related parents’ deaths have also increased the likelihood of early marriage for female orphans who may be left without support. In some cases, parents’ fears about their children’s care if they were to die from COVID-19 led them to push their children into underage marriage. The NCRB’s CII report shows that the number of cases filed under the PCM Act exceeded 1000 for the first time in 2021, with 1050 cases registered, indicating a 34% increase from the previous year. The number of cases has been increasing gradually since 2011 and has risen by nearly 50% in 2020 compared to 2019 and more than doubled in 2021. Of the total 4,654 cases registered between 2011 and 2021, 39% were registered in just the past two years (2020 and 2021). The increase in cases may indicate better reporting of such cases or a genuine rise in their occurrence, or both.

Figure 2: Number of registered child marriage cases between 2011-2021



Recommendations and conclusion

Social and economic factors are the main reasons for leading cases of girl-child marriages in India. Due to poor economic conditions, bonding in society is weaker. To improve the relationship between girl child and their parents, have to increase bonding at the societal level. In many circumstances, if a parent is educated, they disagree with their girl-child marriage. Educated parents are also aware of the laws which restrict child marriages and programmes and policies which can benefit girl children for education. Education among parents is also one of the factors to increase interaction with a girl child. Similarly, state authorities, with their advocacy and awareness programme can eradicate traditional social norms and cultural practices which prioritise the marriage of a girl child. Apart from them, gender socialisation practices are another way to increase relations and bonding between girl children with their parents. Gender socialisation teaches individuals how to behave and take appropriate ways to promote gender equality, which can improve the status of girl children in society. The Global Programme has partnered with various government bodies, civil society organizations, academic institutions, media entities, and other stakeholders to engage across sectors such as health, education, social protection, child protection, justice, finance, and gender socialisation to address this issue.^[51]

From the legal point of view, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) law only makes child marriages illegal if they are a result of force, threat, fraud, kidnapping, or violation of a court order. In other cases, child marriages remain legally valid unless one of the parties files a petition to annul the marriage. Children are often unaware of their legal rights and depend on others to challenge violations of their rights in court. If a child bride or groom wants to annul the marriage, they must file a petition within two years of becoming an adult. For minors, the complaint

must be filed through a guardian or “next friend” along with the Child Marriage Prohibition Officer. This two-year limit is challenging for girls because they often have children in their first two years of marriage, making it even more difficult to leave the marriage.

It is also noticed that the Centre, State, and village communities are working with international and national organisations to eradicate orthodox social norms through advocacy and awareness. But until, unless poverty and illiteracy are not removed properly in all the states, the issues will remain the same. Child marriage is increasing in India because parents still consider the girl child as a financial and economic burden, employment generation in rural are a sand reduce the parents’ economic conditions. It is required to all departments work to-gether, such as education, health, labour, Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, District Child Protection Unit, Child Welfare Committees, the Juvenile Justice Board and the Special Juvenile Police Unit, who were responsible to implement programme and policies, ensure that it is not only on paper but working in reality.

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Conflict of interest: None

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