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Increased Child Marriages in Lockdown

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Why in News

Recently, some activists and organisations of Karnataka have raised the issue of **increased child marriages in Lockdown** with the **Ministry of Women and Child Development**.

According to a report published in December 2020 by ChildLine India, the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown have proved to be new drivers of child marriages in rural Madhya Pradesh.

Key Points

- **Child Marriage:**
 - It is defined as a **marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18** and refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which **children under the age of 18 live with a partner as if married**.
 - **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** estimates suggest that each year, **at least 1.5 million girls under 18 get married in India**, which makes it **home to the largest number of child brides in the world** - accounting for a **third of the global total**.
 - Recent study by **The Lancet** shows that up to **2.5 million more girls** (below the age of 18) **around the world are at risk of marriage** in the next 5 years **because of the Covid-19 pandemic**.

- **Reason for Increased Child Marriages during Lockdowns:**
 - **Lack of Alert Mechanism:**

Earlier, when child marriages happened at wedding halls, temples, etc, there were people who would alert the relevant authorities or activists who would be able to reach on time to stop it. But **now, with marriages happening at homes, we may get fewer alerts and our going there could be treated as trespass.**
 - **Pandemic Induced Pressures:**
 - **Economic pressures** due to the pandemic have **pushed poor parents to marry off girls early.**
 - **With no schools, safety of children, particularly girls, was a major reason** for increase in violence against children and child marriages.
- **General Causes for Child Marriages:**
 - **Age Factor:**
 - Some **parents consider the age period of 15-18 as unproductive**, especially for girls, **so they start finding a match for their child during this age period.**

Underaged girls are more prone to child marriage than boys.
 - Further, the **Right To Education Act** makes education free and compulsory up to the age of 14 only.
 - **Insecurity:**

Law and Order are still **not able to provide a secure environment for the girls in adolescent age**, so some parents get their girl child married at a young age.
 - **Other Reasons:**
 - Poverty,
 - Political and financial reasons,
 - Lack of education,
 - Patriarchy and gender inequalities, etc.

- **Impact:**
 - **Delays Demographic Dividend:**
Child Marriage contributes to larger families and in turn, population growth. This delays the demographic dividend that would have come from reduced fertility and investment in education.
 - **Bad for Family:**
Children married at a young age **do not understand the responsibilities of marriage**. This results in a **lack of understanding among family members**. Hence, **disturbs the institution of the family**.
 - **On the Child Bride:**
 - It **negatively influences children's rights to education, health and protection**.
 - A girl who is married as a child is more likely to be **out of school and not earn money** and contribute to the community.
 - She is **more likely to experience domestic violence and become infected with HIV/AIDS**.
 - There are **more chances of her dying due to complications during pregnancy** and childbirth.
- **Government Initiatives to Prevent Child Marriages:**
 - The **Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929** restricts the practice of child marriage.
 - The **Special Marriage Act, 1954** and the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006** prescribe 18 and 21 years as the minimum age of consent for marriage for women and men respectively.
The **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006** was enacted to address and fix the shortcomings of the Child Marriage Restraint Act.
 - The **Union Ministry for Women and Child Development has set up a committee to examine** matters pertaining to age of motherhood, imperatives of lowering **Maternal Mortality Ratio** and the improvement of nutritional levels among women. The Committee is headed by Jaya Jaitely.
The Committee was proposed in the **Union Budget 2020-21**.
 - Prevention of Child Marriage is a part of **SDG 5** which **deals with gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls**.

Way Forward

- One way of keeping a check on child marriages during the pandemic would be to ensure that there is a strong cohort of child protection workers among essential health workers.
- India has a robust system of grassroots workers who have done commendable work in ensuring that health and other social security services reach people in these dire times.

- If such workers were incorporated into the system they could keep a check on girl children at risk of early marriage and take steps to avert these. This could be in the form of awareness counseling and helping some benefits reach the family concerned.

Source:TH