



Menace of Girl-Child Marriage in India

This editorial is based on [“Save Her Childhood”](#) which was published in Indian Express on 26/11/2021. It talks about causes of girl-child marriages in India, recent findings about the same and the issues associated to ending child marriage.

Child marriage is a global issue fuelled by gender inequality, poverty, social norms and insecurity, and has devastating consequences all over the world. High levels of child marriage reflect discrimination and lack of opportunities for women and girls in society.

Despite various statutory provisions in India and initiatives like [Conditional Cash Transfer \(CCT\) programmes](#), the progress is not very impressive. [Nationwide Covid-19 Lockdown](#) further deteriorated the scenario.

Child Marriage in India

- **Prevalence:** [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.
- **Root Causes of Girl Child Marriage:** Child marriages happen within a social and economic context, embedded in a **set of beliefs about the status of women and girls, and their role as wives** and mothers.
 - Associated with these are the reality of domestic labour and care work performed by women, a **belief that girls need to marry early for safety and protection**, and **apprehensions about the risk to family honour** or economic burden.
 - Another cause include the **preference for sons which result in more than the preferred number of daughters**.
 - The problem is not much prevalent in rich families who can afford to raise more children.
 - However, for poorer families, one solution is to marry these daughters off prematurely, thus creating a supply of child, even prepubescent, brides.
 - 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.
 - Moreover, the [Right To Education Act](#) makes education free and compulsory up to the age of 14 only.
- **NFHS Findings about Child Marriage:** Data from the fourth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS4) in 2015-16 shows that pre-Covid, one in four girls in India was being married before 18.
 - Around 8% of women aged 15-19 years were mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey.
 - As per reports, [more child marriages have been noticed during the Covid pandemic](#).
 - The first phase findings of [NFHS5](#) (2019-20) also **do not show any substantial improvements towards ending child marriage**.

Child Marriage - Associated Issues

- **Human Rights Violation:** Child marriage violates girls' human rights and makes them almost invisible to policy.
 - Some of the basic rights include the **Right to Education, Right to Rest and Leisure, Right to Protection from Mental or Physical Abuse** including Rape and Sexual Exploitation.
- **Disempowerment of Women:** Since child brides are not able to complete their education, they **remain dependent and underpowered** which acts as a big hurdle towards achieving gender equality.
- **Associated Health Issues:** The costs of child marriage include **teenage pregnancy and child stunting, population growth, poor learning outcomes** for children and the **loss of women's participation in the workforce**.
 - The low domestic status of teenage wives typically condemns them to long hours of domestic labour, **poor nutrition and anaemia, social isolation, domestic violence** and lesser decision-making powers within the home.
 - Poor education, **malnutrition**, and early pregnancy also lead to low birth weight of babies, perpetuating the **intergenerational cycle of malnutrition**.
- **Inefficiency of CCTs in Ending Child Marriage:** Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programmes give money to households on the condition that they comply with certain predefined requirements.
 - CCTs have been the main policy instrument introduced by most states in the last two decades to end child marriage.
 - However, they **alone cannot change social norms**. With one-size-fits-all conditions, that **may not always be responsive to the lived realities of teenage girls**.

Way Forward

- **Policy Interventions:** Legislation is one important part of the approach towards eliminating girl-child marriage from India.
 - Karnataka amended the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act** in 2017, **declaring every child marriage void ab initio**, making it a cognisable offence, and introducing a minimum period of rigorous imprisonment for all who enable a child marriage. **Similar can be done at the central level**.
- **Governmental Action for Social Change:** Field bureaucrats across multiple departments, including teachers, anganwadi supervisors, panchayat and revenue staff, all of whom interact with rural communities, **should be notified as child marriage prohibition officers**.
 - Moreover, **decentralising birth and marriage registration to gram panchayats** will protect women and girls with essential age and marriage documents, thus better enabling them to claim their rights.
- **Drivers of Social Change to Play a Fundamental Role:** These include expansion of secondary education, access to safe and affordable public transport, and support for young women to apply their education to earn a livelihood.
 - **Expansion of education goes far beyond mere access to it.** Girls must be able to attend school regularly, remain there, and achieve.
 - **States can leverage their network** of residential schools, girls' hostels, and public transport, especially in **underserved areas**, to ensure that teenage girls do not get pushed out of education.
 - Regular **gender equality conversations** need to be held with high school girls and boys to shape progressive attitudes that will sustain into adulthood.
- **Empowerment Measures:** Empowerment measures, too, are required to end child marriage, such as **community engagement through programmes** like Mahila Samakhya.
 - **Children's village assemblies** in the gram panchayats across India can provide a **platform for children to voice their concerns**.
- **Economic Growth, Essential for Prevention of Child Marriage:** Ensuring later marriage for girls requires **India to evolve not only culturally but also economically**.
 - Some of this has happened, as Indians have become more prosperous, and as extreme poverty levels have declined, decline in child brides has been witnessed.
 - **Economic growth will save Indian girls from child marriage.** Combined with educational and **cultural awareness against a sex preference**, which no doubt will

take longer; economic success a lasting solution.

Conclusion

Drivers for social change like education, legal provisions and initiatives for creating awareness have still a lot to cover with respect to eliminating girl child marriage. Moreover, it is a change that has to come from within.

Drishti Mains Question

Drivers for social change like education, legal provisions and initiatives for creating awareness have still a lot to cover with respect to eliminating girl child marriage. Comment.

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