



Rise of Child Marriages in West Bengal

For Prelims: [Child marriage](#), [Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 \(PCMA\)](#), **Kanyashree Prakalpa Scheme**,

For Mains: Major Factors Associated with Child Marriage, Legislative Framework and Initiatives Related to Child Marriage in India.

Source: TH

Why in News?

A recent *Lancet* study on [child marriage in India](#) highlighted an overall decrease in child marriage across the country. However, it emphasized that certain states, specifically **Bihar (16.7%), West Bengal (15.2%), Uttar Pradesh (12.5%), and Maharashtra (8.2%)**, collectively contributed to over half of the total headcount burden of child marriages in girls.

- Despite the implementation of multiple **policy interventions in West Bengal aimed at curbing child marriage**, the region has experienced a **substantial surge of 32.3% in the incidence of child marriages**. This increase corresponds to over 500,000 additional girls getting married as children.

Note

- **National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21):**
 - The National Family Health Survey-5 indicates that the prevalence of women **aged 20-24 years** married before 18 remains high in **West Bengal at 41.6%, compared to the national figure of 23.3%**.

Has Policy Intervention in West Bengal Effectively Curbed Child Marriage?

- **Policy Interventions to Stop Child Marriage in West Bengal:**
 - **The Kanyashree Prakalpa Scheme:**
 - Launched in 2013, Kanyashree Prakalpa incentivizes the **schooling of teenage girls aged 13 to 18** while simultaneously discouraging child marriage. The scheme has covered 81 lakh girls, according to the West Bengal Budget for 2023-24.
 - The scheme received international recognition with the **United Nations Public Service Award in 2017**.
 - While the **school enrolment of girls has increased in the State**, questions are being posed based on [National Family Health Survey](#) data and the Lancet study of whether the scheme has achieved its promise of arresting child marriage.

- **Rupashree Prakalpa:**
 - In addition to Kanyashree, the state government runs the Rupashree Prakalpa, **providing cash incentives for girls' marriages.**
 - Some families utilize benefits from both schemes, organizing marriages shortly after cashing in on the school scheme.
- **Educational Stride and Child Marriage Rates:**
 - Despite **girl's enrolment in schools has "significantly increased** over the past few years and **yet the incidence of child marriage remains high** in West Bengal".
 - The All-India Survey of Higher Education for 2020-21 puts the number of **estimated enrolment of girls in West Bengal at 9.29 lakh**, which is higher than the boys enrolment which stood at 8.63 lakh.
 - As per NFHS- 5, the Purba Medinipur district with **over 88% literacy rate** has the highest incidence of **child marriage of more than 57.6%.**
 - Experts noted **migration in West Bengal fuels child marriage** as families fear **leaving unmarried daughters behind**, driven by societal norms and economic factors.
 - This perpetuates a cycle where cultural expectations prioritize early marriages for **wives to bear children while men work.**
- **Challenges in Law Implementation:**
 - Beyond social issues, **challenges in law implementation contribute to the persistence of child marriage.**
 - As West Bengal's 105 cases under The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006 in 2021 raise concerns. Because comparatively, states with **smaller populations reported more cases.**
 - The Ministry introduced the [Prohibition of Child Marriage \(Amendment\) Bill, 2021](#), proposing raising the age of marriage for women to 21, currently under Parliamentary review.
 - The data suggests gaps in law enforcement and highlights the need for comprehensive strategies.

What are the Impacts of Child Marriage?

- **Ending Childhood:**
 - **Child marriage is a global problem and is compounded by poverty.** It abruptly **ends a boy's/girl's childhood**, pushing them into adulthood before they are physically and mentally prepared.
 - Arranged marriages often involve girls marrying significantly older men, intensifying the challenges they face.
 - Early marriage significantly decreases the likelihood of girls staying in school, leading to **lifelong economic repercussions.**
 - Child marriage leads **childhood grooms to drop out of school** and often **settle for low-paying jobs to provide for their families.**
 - Child brides and grooms often experience isolation and have their freedom curtailed, limiting their social interactions and personal autonomy.
- **Human Rights Violation:**
 - Child marriage is considered a [human rights violation](#) and a **recognised form of sexual and gender-based violence**, the adverse impact of child marriage is manifested across maternal and child health in the State.
 - Child brides are frequently denied their [fundamental rights](#), including access to health, education, safety, and the opportunity for active participation.
 - [United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#) **categorizes child marriage as a human rights violation** due to its adverse impacts on the development of both girls and boys.
 - Each year, some **12 million more girls will marry before reaching age 18** and of those, 4 million are under age 15.
 - **Save the Children's Global Girlhood Report** estimates that an additional **2.5 million girls are at risk of child marriage** globally between 2020 and 2025, as a result of reported increases in all types of **gender-based violence** due to the [Covid-19 pandemic.](#)
- **Maternal and Child Health Implications:**
 - The adverse impact of child marriage extends to maternal and child health.

- Child brides often become **pregnant during adolescence**, when the risk of **complications during pregnancy** and childbirth increases. The practice can also isolate girls from family and friends, taking a heavy toll on their mental health.
- Child brides are also more susceptible to contracting **Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)**.

What are the Initiatives to Tackle Child Marriage?

- **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA)**
- **BetiBachaoBetiPadhao (BBBP) scheme.**
- **National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR).**
- **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012.**
- **CHILDLINE.**

Way Forward

- Mobilize **political will at both state and national levels** to prioritize the eradication of child marriage through legislative measures.
 - Conduct **social campaigns involving all stakeholders** including panchayats, schools and local communities and without a political will to enforce the existing laws the situation at the grass roots will not improve as rapidly as it has in other parts of the country.
- Promote a culture of **reporting and transparency** by regularly updating and providing detailed information on child marriage cases under PCMA 2006.
 - Facilitate a **comprehensive review of PCMA 2006** to identify loopholes and areas for improvement in enforcement.
- Advocate for the swift approval of the **Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021**, by the Parliamentary Standing Committee.
 - The Bill amends the PCMA 2006 to increase the **minimum age of marriage of females to 21 years**. Further, the Bill will override any other law, custom, or practice.
- Empower girls with **information, skills, and support networks** for increased autonomy and decision-making.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains

Q. Examine the main provisions of the National Child Policy and throw light on the status of its implementation. **(2016).**