

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILD MARRIAGE-A STUDY

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## Abstract:

*child marriage is one in which the girl is below the age of eighteen years and the boy is below the age of twenty one years, We have found that parents and children are concerned about the lack of access to education and learning settings due to the pandemic. A popular mainstream show like “Balika Vadhu” was definitely a step in the right direction but then again somewhere in the midst of gaining TRPs, the main issue of combating child marriages took a backseat. Proper media sensitization is required for a major change to take place. Poverty For many poor families, marrying their daughter at an early age essentially is a strategy for economic survival; it means one less person to feed, clothe and educate. In society, the importance of financial transactions at the time of marriage also tends to push families to marry their daughters early. For example, in many sub-Saharan cultures parents get a high bride price for a daughter who is married near puberty. The Indian Constitution provides for prohibitions against child marriage through various laws and enactments. The first law that was designed was the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 which extended to the whole of India except Jammu and Kashmir. This act defines the ages of an adult male and female. For girls to refuse marriage, they have to understand and ‘own’ their rights, and be able to support their own life plans. A wide range of programmes should invest in girls, their participation and their well-being. Programmes should equip girls with training, skills, and information, and provide safe spaces and support networks.*

**Key Words-**Child, Teenage, Balika, Covid-19, Beti Bachavo-Beti padavo, Childern parents.

## INTRODUCTION

Child marriage as a concept can be defined as the formal or an informal union between two individuals before attaining the age of eighteen years. This institution should be seen as an abuse of human rights since this is one form of a forced marriage. As per the law in India, a child marriage is one in which the girl is below the age of eighteen years and the boy is below the age of twenty one years.

Child marriages have a history in India. They have existed from the times of the Delhi Sultanate when the monarchy system was prevalent. Indians also used child marriage as a weapon to protect girls from rapes and abduction by foreign rulers. Another social reason to initiate child marriages was that the elders wanted to see the faces of the grand children.

Child marriage continues to be a reality for many of the world's girls because of a variety of factors. These include

**Poverty,  
Lack of education and job opportunities,  
Insecurity in the face of war and conflict,  
The force of custom and tradition.**

### **Poverty**

**Poverty** For many poor families, marrying their daughter at an early age essentially is a strategy for economic survival; it means one less person to feed, clothe and educate. In society, the importance of financial transactions at the time of marriage also tends to push families to marry their daughters early. For example, in many sub-Saharan cultures parents get a high bride price for a daughter who is married near puberty.

### **Limited education and economic options**

Little or no schooling strongly correlates with being married at a young age. Conversely, attending school and having higher levels of education protect girls from the possibility of early marriage. In many countries, educating girls often is less of a priority than educating boys. When a woman's most important role is considered to be that of a wife, mother and homemaker, schooling girls and preparing them for the jobs may be given short shrift.

And even when poor families want to send their daughters to school, they often lack access to nearby, quality schools and the ability to pay school fees. It is usually safer and economically more rewarding to spend

limited resources on educating sons than daughters. This boxes families into early marriage as the only viable option for girls.

#### **Insecurity in the face of conflict**

When families live in unsafe regions, parents may genuinely believe that marrying their daughters is the best way to protect them from danger. In war-affected areas in society, a girl may be married to a warlord or another authority figure who can ensure that she and her family remain safe. In the Society and elsewhere, girls have been abducted or recruited by armed groups and made into the 'bush wives' of combatants and commanders.

#### **Tradition and Religion**

In many societies, parents are under pressure to marry off their daughters as early as possible in an effort to prevent her from becoming sexually active before marriage; a woman who does so brings dishonor to her family and community. Because marriage often determines a woman's status in many societies, parents also worry that if they don't marry their daughters according to social expectations, they will not be able to marry them at all.

Forced child marriage also is a route to cementing family, clan, and tribal connections or settling obligations. For example, in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, Afghanistan and in some parts of the Middle East, marrying young girls is a common practice to help the grooms' families offset debts or to settle inter-family disputes.

#### **IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE**

Once married, the girl child is forced to leave her home and inhabit another place altogether wherein she is forced to take up roles that she isn't mentally prepared for. Huge responsibilities like that of mother and a daughter-in-law are too much for a minor girl.

It eventually leads to isolation and depression. For the males, taking up a responsibility as critical as that of wife as in to take of her finances and share your own finances also becomes taxing.

Childhood is lost and the freedom to play and learn is also snatched in the process. Early marriages also carry with them excessive risk factors. There is a greater risk of contracting sexual diseases like HIV. Also, girls who marry early are less likely to be updated about pregnancy and related subjects. Infants born to such mothers are more likely to suffer from malnutrition, low birth weights.

In India, child marriages are still prevalent in the state of Kerala, the state with the highest literacy rates.

According to a UNICEF report, in India there were more child marriages in rural areas than urban. Bihar has the highest incidence of child marriage at 68 per cent while Himachal Pradesh with around nine per cent has the lowest incidence as per the report.

#### **LAWS TO PREVENT CHILD MARRIAGES IN INDIA**

The Indian Constitution provides for prohibitions against child marriage through various laws and enactments. The first law that was designed was the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 which extended to the whole of India except Jammu and Kashmir. This act defines the ages of an adult male and female.

If there is a marriage taking place between a boy who is aged between eighteen to twenty one years and a girl below the age of eighteen years, it implies an imprisonment up to fifteen days along with a fine of one thousand rupees. The act was again amended in the year 1940 to rise the ages of male and female children.

Another law that exists is the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. This act addressed the flaws contained in the child Marriage Restraint Act. Thus, this act was meant to strictly prohibit the marriage rather than merely restricting it. Under this law, the children have the choice to declare their marriage as void up to two years of reaching adulthood.

But, this law does not extend to the Muslims which is a major shortcoming of the law as this law is binding to all citizens of India. Also, sex with minors is a criminal offence under Section 376 of the Indian Penal Code.

The issue of confusion over marital rape is also a factor which proves as a hindrance to curb this menace as marital rape is not illegal in India.

Again, the laws are not without criticisms. A major obstacle in curbing the evil is that most of these marriages are carried out informally and thus remain unregistered. Most of the times, it become an uphill task to decipher the correct age of the children as they do not have birth certificates as proofs or even if they have, that happens to be a fraudulent one since it establishes the age inappropriately as an adult.

There needs to be mechanisms much stronger than these laws in order to put a stop on child marriages. Immediate reporting to the police needs to be done as and when one hears of child marriage taking place.

#### **HOW TO INCREASE SOCIAL AWARENESS REGARDING CHILD MARRIAGE**

Children need to be made aware of their human rights and must be taught to refuse and speak up once such an incident is taking place or is about to take place.

The media also needs to adopt a more proactive role in generating awareness towards this heinous ritual.

A popular mainstream show like “**Balika Vadhu**” was definitely a step in the right direction but then again somewhere in the midst of gaining TRPs, the main issue of combating child marriages took a backseat. Proper media sensitization is required for a major change to take place.

While on one hand, it is stated that child marriage will still take nearly fifty years to be eradicated, genuine efforts, strict enforcements of the legal provisions and change the scenarios to a great extent. Child marriage has been declining at a rate of one per cent per year in the last two decades but this pace is slow.

UNICEF has partnered with NGOs and government organizations to accelerate the process of curbing the rampant practice of child marriages. Organizations like CARPED and Child line have proposed setting up for social homes for the victims of child marriage victims and provide them with funds till the time they are not mature enough along with their education. It needs to be understood that poverty and lack of education are the major factors that undermine the efforts to end the menace.

Child Marriage affects both girls and boys, but the number of girls who get married before they turn 18 is much higher. The majority of child marriages takes place in South Asia. UNICEF reports that, in the region, one in five girls under the age of 15 is married.

The problem is particularly serious in India where each year more than 1,5 million underage girls get married. Now, the numbers are higher than ever before as the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the biggest surge in child marriage rates in over two decades.

#### **Why has there been a rise in child marriage rates?**

Child marriages are a complex issue and motivations for marrying their daughters off can be different for each family. Nevertheless, the common motivation is poverty. Older men offer money in exchange for a young girl's hand.

Because of the pandemic, many families are now living on the edge of poverty. With no other ways of getting income, giving young girls away to these men is the only way for the poorest households to afford food.

Moreover, if the girls move away from home to live with their partners, family expenses are reduced.

#### **Concerns around lack of access to education**

We have found that parents and children are concerned about the lack of access to education and learning settings due to the pandemic. For example, research conducted with refugees in Society found that since August 2020, community members have been raising concerns about the impact of the closure of Temporary Learning Centres (TLCs) and Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) on the educational development of their children. Analysis of ongoing community feedback data shows that people want the educational facilities to be reopened and need access to free educational materials for their children.

This is not just causing parents concern, but also affecting the wellbeing of children. Children reported that they feel upset about not being able to learn and play in educational settings as they did before COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic is already having a devastating effect on families, communities and economies, and we are still to see the full impact on the poorest countries and those with fragile health, social welfare, communications and governance systems.

The virus, and government measures to contain its spread, will be most devastating for those working in the informal sector who cannot isolate themselves, including slum-dwellers and those living in refugee and internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps.

In the 17-point advisory, the Department has stated that necessary prior permission for weddings and travel passes shall be obtained from the competent local authorities

**Bengaluru:** Karnataka's Department of Health and Family Welfare Services has issued an advisory for marriages, stating that not more than 50 guests shall be allowed and the consumption of liquor on the occasion will be prohibited.

In the 17-point advisory, the Department has stated that necessary prior permission for the event and travel passes shall be obtained from the competent local authorities.

Besides liquor, consumption of paan, gutkha, tobacco, etc., is also not allowed, and spitting at public places is prohibited.

"The marriage event shall allow a maximum number of not more than 50 guests. The event shall be conducted at a suitable public place with good natural ventilation (no air condition). Persons from containment zones shall not be allowed to attend the event. Persons more than 65 years of age, pregnant women and children below 10 years are not permitted to attend the event," the advisory reads.

According to the advisory, sanitizers should be provided at the entry and other appropriate places at the venue. Also, thermal screening of all persons shall be conducted at the entry of the venue. The scanner should be held 3-15 cms away from a person's forehead.

Those interviewed expressed concerns about child protection due to children being out of school – this is especially true for girls. Our insights aim to inform the wider humanitarian sector responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the development of BBC Media Action programmers and digital content that aim to support parents and young people. Our key findings are below and the full research summary is also available to download.

It is estimated that even before the pandemic more people lived in extreme poverty. That accounts for almost 30% of people living in very poor conditions worldwide. The economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be felt the most by these vulnerable communities.

#### **What child marriage means for girls**

Child marriages are also driven by socio-cultural factors as the majority of them take place in conservative societies where women are seen as inferior to men. Girls are forced to look after a household and raise a family and have no control over their lives.

When they are married off to an older man, they become confined to the domestic realm and are forced into adult roles with many responsibilities. They are separated from their families and become completely dependent on their new partners. Child marriage means the end of childhood and puts the girls at risk of maltreatment and exploitation.

#### **Advertisement**

Many girls who cannot deal with abuse and gender-based violence decide to flee their new homes and, having no savings of their own and nowhere to go, become child\_refugees. Consequently, some of them look for ways to get to a country where they could get asylum. Often, however, on the way they fall victims of human trafficking.

#### **How to deal with the problem**

For now, each government in South Asia has a different approach. Because of insufficient funds and many other problems like unstable political situation, corruption, and overpopulation that the region is facing, majority of them have not been effective in their efforts. Governmental institutions need to be strengthened to be able to implement comprehensive child protection mechanisms. Moreover governments have to work with NGOs to address the roots of the problem and prevent future instances of child marriages.

How COVID-19 is affecting the incidence of child marriage, experience from the society crisis and other acute emergencies strongly suggests that girls and women will be disproportionately affected, particularly amongst the poorest and socially marginalized groups. Many girls, women, boys and men will be affected by the crisis.

This brief focuses on how adolescent girls, particularly those at risk of marriage or already married girls will be affected in the short- and longer-term.

Many of the complex factors that drive child marriage in stable environments are exacerbated in emergency settings, as family and community structures break down during crisis and displacement.

A pandemic of this nature will also present unique challenges that can increase child marriage both in the acute and recovery phases.

Challenges include the loss of household income, higher risk of violence in the household and lack of access to schooling.

Plan International research shows that, in crisis settings, girls live in fear of violence and are not only concerned about the constant presence of armed men, but also about gender based violence (GBV) within families.

As per the advisory, anyone found having fever, cold, cough, difficulty in breathing shall not be permitted to attend the event and immediately referred to seek medical advice.

"All persons shall wear face mask compulsorily. All persons shall maintain a physical distance of more than one metre. Hand wash with soap and water shall be provided in washrooms," adds the advisory.

Apart from this, the venue shall be "clean and hygienic," and a "nodal person shall be identified for overseeing the arrangements and coordination at the venue." Also, a list of attendees with contact details has to be maintained and all guests should have downloaded Aarogya Setu app.

The advisory comes amid nationwide lockdown imposed as a precautionary measure to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Karnataka's Health Department on Friday informed that 69 more COVID-19 cases have been reported in the state, taking the total number of corona virus patients to 1,056. Out of the total cases, 539 patients are active while 480 patients have been discharged and there have been 36 virus-related deaths so far.

## RECOMNDATIONS

Human rights should be upheld in times of crisis.

- All those involved in the humanitarian response and recovery period should ensure their activities do not lead to – or perpetuate – further discrimination, abuse, violence, neglect or exploitation, including the practice of early and forced marriage. Governments and those involved in humanitarian

- Response must take into account the needs of adolescent girls during humanitarian efforts. Programming should be comprehensive and cross spectral, and address both life-saving, immediate needs, and promote long-term resilience, including of adolescent girls. Prevention and protection needs, particularly those rooted in harmful gender norms, should also be prioritized in the first wave of response. Interventions must include adolescent girl

- programming and safe spaces. All girls under 18 must be granted access to education, psychosocial support, sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services regardless of their marital status. These should include contraception, abortion and maternal health services, and life skills training. Social, cultural and gender norms, roles and

- Relations influence women's and men's vulnerability to infection, exposure and treatment. COVID-19 responses must therefore be informed by strong analysis of gender inequalities and informed by sex- and age-disaggregated data, as far as possible.

According to UNESCO, 180 countries had implemented nationwide school and university closures by the end of March 2020. This affects over 87% of world's student population. If schools are closed, girls in development or humanitarian settings may be at increased risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and child marriage.

According to UNICEF, school closures during the 2014-16 Ebola outbreaks in Society contributed to spikes in child labour, neglect, sexual abuse and teenage pregnancies. of teenage pregnancy more than doubled to 14,000 during the outbreak. There was also a "sharp increase" in teenage pregnancies and early marriages in some affected areas, due to girls' increased school dropout rates.<sup>6</sup> School closures will also have long-term impacts on girls' futures – particularly for poorer and more remote families.

If they are unable to return after prolonged absence, as education may become unaffordable due to economic distress or due to girls being married or becoming pregnant. In many countries, households do not have access to internet or television. This must be taken into account when developing distance learning approaches. Girls are often required to look after younger siblings, which may also impact on their ability to continue studies through online schooling, where this is available.

Governments should support continued learning by

- Investing in inclusive gender-responsive distance education methods, such as radio broadcasts. Safeguarding measures should be in place to

- Prevent online harassment, bullying and other types of cyber violence on online platforms. Community sensitization should continue as part of

- Distance learning to ensure those parents, leaders and other community members are aware of the importance of girls' education. Adolescent girls (and boys) should continue to have

- Access to comprehensive sexual education (CSE), SRHR information and referrals to services as part of distance learning while schools are closed. Education and other support workers should

- Receive training to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills needed to recognize and prevent violence against girls, and the risk of child marriage, through safe referral practices and protection services. When schools reopen, pregnant girls, married girls

- And young mothers should be fully supported to return to education. This might involve flexible learning, catch-up courses and accelerated learning opportunities. It may also involve checking school enrolment lists to identify and follow up with those girls who have not returned to school. As far as possible, girls and young women should be

- Girls should be involved in shaping decisions about their education.

## CONCLUSION

### Strategy to empower girls

For girls to refuse marriage, they have to understand and 'own' their rights, and be able to support their own life plans. A wide range of programmes should invest in girls, their participation and their well-being.

Programmes should equip girls with training, skills, and information, and provide safe spaces and support networks.

This means providing girls with the chance to connect with their peers and support each other as well as having access to formal support services. It also depends on the existence of real alternatives to marriage - different lifestyles and roles for unmarried girls that girls and their families value and respect.

#### **Outcomes**

- Girls are increasingly aware of their rights
- Girls have the opportunity to develop solidarity with one another through peer groups and collective action
- Alternative economic, social roles for girls and women exist and are valued
- Increased access of married and unmarried girls to health, education, economic, and legal support

Our strategic activities should help girls see themselves as 'rights bearers' with choices and opportunity. They should change what families and communities expect of girls, so that marrying girls young is no longer the only option available. And they should change girls' conditions, so that they enjoy greater support from their peers and from service providers.

Programmes that empower girls

#### **Safe space programmes**

Safe space programmes which offer a varied curriculum covering life skills, health and financial literacy can provide girls with an opportunity to build their skills, learn and meet friends and mentors in an informal setting and learn about the services they can access in their community.

Safe space programmes can successfully build girls' self-confidence, agency and self-efficacy, which they need to thrive. They can provide a good alternative for girls who do not have access to formal education such as married girls. Having a safe regular meeting place allows girls to meet with peers and share experiences which can reduce their sense of isolation and vulnerability.

Some of these programmes have economic empowerment components, such as conditional cash transfers, or the provision of a goat or chicken, which have proven successful in increasing the age of marriage.

#### **Supporting young people to be agents of change**

Supporting young people to be agents of change can be an effective and empowering process in and of itself. Many organizations work with young people so they can advocate for change as well as helping to inform the design of programmes that directly benefit their peers.

Youth groups, encouraging dialogue between youth and community leaders, and building the capacity of young people are all ways of supporting young people to be champions of change in their own communities.

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