

# Strategies To Unearth The Practices And Prevalence Of Early Marriage

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## Abstract

*In all civilizations, marriage is considered an important part of life as men and women are socially expected to get married. The age of marriage and the subsequent implications are the major cause of concern in many cases. In India, as per the Prohibition of Child Marriages Act, 2006 the term Child marriage is defined as the marriage between a person who, if a male, is under twenty-one years of age, and if a female, is under eighteen years of age. Child marriage is always a global challenge and topic of discussion. The harmful consequences of early marriage are literacy rate, health care costs, increase in poverty, health problems, early childbearing, and poor maternal health. It is necessary to provide economic opportunities, and education and create awareness among the girls, their families, and the community over child marriages along with the public health personnel to provide the opportunity to work with young girls and women to lead a healthy life that impacts generations that follow.*

**Keywords:** *Child marriage, Child Rights, Health Issues, Poverty, Child Education*

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## I. Introduction

Marriage is a memorable event in society that is important for the family formation process. The rapid population growth is a cause of concern for developing countries, which used to face the problem of high poverty and environmental issues. According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is mandatory to protect all the people to ensure peace, prosperity, and human rights to eliminate all harmful practices such as early, child, and forced marriage and female mutilations. The stoppages of child marriages are important to achieve the SDGs goal globally by 2030 to ensure that every child has an opportunity to lead a healthy life. India has taken the child marriage issue into greater context and introduced the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 which prohibits marriage for females under the age of 18 years and males under the age of 21 years.

According to the Population Council Report 2021, it is estimated that 15 million girls get married before the age of 18 years every year, and the poorest children are most likely to be affected because of deprivation related to poverty, lack of education, and poor nutrition. Girls who marry during their school days rarely go to school again, either become a dropout of school before marriage or upon marriage. According to a recent UNICEF report (2021), the percentage of girls aged between 15 and 19 who are married in different countries is Congo (74%), Niger (70%), Afghanistan (54%), while in India (23%) of girls get married before they turn 19 years. Despite the policy and program discourses against early marriage, the scourge has increased significantly over the last decade in different countries as a substantial proportion of young women continue to marry in adolescence (Raj et al., 2009).

The cognitive, social, and emotional skill development takes place during the school days of the children. The dropout rate of girls rises significantly after secondary education as one in every five girls enrolled drops out after the class of eighth which is one of the causes of child marriage (Das & Devamoni, 1998). However, child marriage is one of the most prevalent forms of sexual abuse and exploitation, especially among adolescent girls. It serves as a means of perpetuating power imbalances between men and women, both at home and outside (Christabella & Melchior, 2022). Child marriage has impacted adolescent girls such as (i) Fertility and population growth; (ii) Health, nutrition, and violence; (iii) Educational attainment; (iv) Labour force participation, earnings, and productivity; and (v) Decision-making and other areas (Wodon et al., 2016).

### **Status of Child Marriages in Tamil Nadu**

Tamil Nadu is a state which incentivized education for children and introduced welfare schemes that empower girls and women, is also plagued by the issue of child marriage. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-21, 12.8 percent of women in the age group of 20 to 24 years in Tamil Nadu were married before they turned 18 years and the national average was 23.3 percent and 4.5 percent of teenage pregnancies are reported in the age group between 15 to 19 years compared to 17.7 percent across the country. As per the data of the Social Welfare and Women Empowerment department Namakkal, Cuddalore, Dindigul, Salem, Krishnagiri, Theni, Tiruchi and Erode districts have been identified as the prime centres of child marriages.

Child Marriage in India is a non-bailable offense with the punishment of rigorous imprisonment of that up-to two years or a fine up to Rs. 1 lakh or both and whoever presents while solemnizing the marriage is punishable. Even with such stringent provisions, child marriages happen due to various reasons in society. According to the Department of Social Welfare and Women Empowerment of Tamil Nadu, In the year 2021, there are 3,799 child marriages reported, of which 2,816 are stopped and 616 cases are registered by law law-enforcing authorities. There are 3,542 child marriages reported in the year 2022 out of which 2,808 are stopped and 543 cases are registered. In the year 2021, 983 children, and 543 children in the year 2022 are rescued after the child marriage. The rescued children are rehabilitated as per the rules in force by the district administration.

### **Causes of Child Marriages**

The causes of child marriage which reflect in education, employment, workplace, family, and socio-political sphere. Many factors are responsible for child marriage with specific discrimination against women (Gupta & Pandey, 2008).

#### ***Poverty of Family***

Poverty is one of the major factors as poor families naturally resort to child marriage to avoid all sorts of burdens. Sometimes the marriage of a young girl to much older man for the bride price is adopted as a strategy for the economic survival of the family.

#### ***Female Education***

The economic development of any country depends on trained human resources for the effective use of physical capital. Imparting school education to girls will help to achieve universal primary education development goals and it will help in the stoppage of child marriage. Many families treat male children as future assets and girl children as burdens of their family.

#### ***Gender Discrimination***

Child marriage is due to the devaluation of women and girls in their culture and discrimination against them in social activities. Discrimination often manifests in all forms of activities which include domestic violence, marital rape, deprivation of food, lack of access to information, education, health care, etc.

#### ***Social Insecurity***

It is presumed that an unmarried woman is not safe as a married woman, which leads to social security and is also a factor responsible for child marriage. Child marriage are conducted to protect girls from offenses, assaults, and teasing against unmarried girls, and protect girls from pregnancy outside of marriage.

#### ***Single Parent Families***

To reduce the burden of single-parents lies, the initiative of child marriage often takes place. The single parents want to perform child marriage to have social security for the girl and the educational status is also poor.

### **Consequences of Child Marriages**

Child marriages are related to many social vulnerabilities and public health issues which include stress of pregnancy, and the birth of premature and low-weight babies. Child brides are more vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual abuse, suffer from health problems, live in poverty, and remain illiterate. The infant mortality rates are high, where child marriages are highly prevalent (Gupta & Das Malay, 2011).

#### ***Maternal Mortality***

Girls married between the age of fifteen to eighteen often fall into pregnancy-related deaths which are the leading cause of mortality for girls. Mothers in this age group face a greater chance of life threat in pregnancy than women aged 20 to 24 and face maternal morbidities and mortality.

### ***Infant Mortality***

The babies born to the mother aged less than eighteen years have high mortality rates when compare to the children born to older mothers. The children that survive have low birth weight, are more likely to be premature have low immunity, and are more at risk for contracting communicable diseases.

### ***Mental Health***

The natural immaturity of the child brides causes them to experience domestic abuse, and violence than girls who married after 18 years. Domestic violence and abuse in the family can lead to post-traumatic stress and mental depression. Girls who married at young age suffer psychological and mental disorders

### ***Illiteracy***

Child marriage affects the ability to access the benefits of education and the girls who are married before eighteen years have less decision-making power. It is presumed that they can't make decisions on their own health care, contraception, household budget, daily household purchase, visit to family and friends, etc. School dropouts are likely to get married early and be suppressed by their community.

### ***Abuse and Violence***

Child brides face a higher incidence of domestic violence and abuse in the family because they have little relation with their husbands and in-laws. They are forced to carry out household activities such as cooking, and looking after children and elders. The violence may include physical, sexual, or psychological abuse which is more than their peers who marry later.

Apart from this longer fertility period, higher order births, anaemia and other health issues are also the consequences of child marriages.

### ***Effect of Child Marriage on Girl's Education***

The school is an important place outside the family involved in mingling young people together and transforming them into all proportions of mature roles and responsibilities. The essence of the rights to education and health is that they enable and guarantee the effective enjoyment of other rights. Through education, girls can develop their self-confidence to voice their suggestions and control over their actions, lives, and bodies including other benefits linked to health care and child welfare.

### ***Observations***

It is found that child marriage directly impacts girls and the major consequences of child marriage are separation and hopelessness, risk of sexual abuse, cervical cancer, menace during delivery of the child, and risk of premature babies. Marriage should have a strong physical, intellectual, psychological, and emotional impact but child marriage is cutting off all these. It is identified that the major consequences of child marriage are a high mortality rate, dropout from school, malnutrition, mental disorder, domestic and sexual viciousness, discernment, exploitation, and repeated pregnancies.

It is observed that when compared to women above the age of 18 years, women married before the age of 18 years are denied their childhood experience, likely to experience physical or sexual violence, to bear children in their earlier years of marriage, to face maternal morbidities and mortality.

To eradicate the social evil of child marriage from society, the Government of India and the Government of Tamil Nadu have focused on strict implementation of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 206, promoting girls' education in schools and higher educational institutions through a conditional cash transfer scheme to encourage retention of the girls in schools and colleges, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme which is aimed at building a protective environment for children in difficult circumstances, by providing noon meals in schools to improve the nutritional and health status of adolescent girls.

## **II. Conclusion And Suggestions**

The outcomes from this study suggest strategies to address the problem of child marriage by educating the parents, community members, and Children about the negative consequences of early marriage. Training for health and community workers on the dangers of child marriage and engaging them as advocates and change agents in their communities and institutions. Further, strengthen the role of the judicial officers particularly the police, judges, and persecutors through training on enforcement of the law against child marriage. All efforts should aim at changing the gender-biased attitudes of parents and society. Society pays a huge cost for allowing this obnoxious, outdated practice to remain in place and allowing the scourges of deprivation, discrimination, dishonour, and injustice to its child citizens.

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