



Early marriage & its health consequences in India

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Abstract

The present study entitled “Early marriage & its health consequences in India” emphasis on early marriages and how it threatens the reproductive health of the girls. It also focuses on reasons of early marriage and challenges to eradicate the same. United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) is working alongside the Government of India in its efforts to prevent child marriage, including the implementation of the convergent national strategy, which includes: Law enforcement; girl’s empowerment, community mobilization & promoting convergence.

Keywords: early marriage, health consequences, united nations international children’s emergency fund (UNICEF)

Introduction

Marriage is an institution ordained by God. It is a union of two people (Adults), usually a man and a woman, to become husband and wife. This union called marriage is to be undergone between two mature people, with mature minds.

Early marriage, or child marriage, is defined as the marriage or union between two people in which one both parties are younger than 18 years of age. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right to “free and full” consent to a marriage, acknowledging that consent cannot be “free and full” when one of the individuals involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner. Nonetheless, in many low- and middle-income countries, particularly in poorer rural areas, girls are often committed to an arranged marriage without their knowledge or consent. Such an arrangement can occur as early as infancy. Parents see marriage as a cultural rite that protects their daughter from sexual assault and offers the care of a male guardian. Parents often feel that a young girl is an economic burden and therefore wish to marry off their young daughters before they become an economic liability.

UNICEF India has played a significant role in highlighting the Indian child marriage rate prevalence data from its 1990s study. According to 2011 nationwide census of India, the average age of marriage for women in India is 21.2. In the age group 15-19, 69.6% of all women surveyed in India had never been married.

Early Marriage Threatens Youth Reproductive Health

Child marriage is a formal marriage or informal union entered into by an individual before reaching the age of 18. The Oxford English Dictionary defines child as, “a person who is below the age of adulthood; a minor, a person who is below the legal age of responsibility and accountability. Therefore, when a child engages in child marriage, it means throwing the responsibilities of an adult to a child, usually a female, and which that child will not be able to handle.

Parents who engage their children in child marriage often feel

that this marriage provides their daughters with a sense of protection from sexual harassment and safe from sexually transmitted infections. However, in reality; young girls tend to marry older men who have had lots of sexual expeditions thereby, placing them at an increased risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection. Spousal age difference can make women more vulnerable to health risks and social isolation by creating power dynamic.

Child marriage has lasting consequences and range from their health, to education, to domestic violence, to social and economic development. A large percent of girls who enter into child marriage are often being compelled to by their parents, the society, their tradition, the girl ignorance and the consequences accrued to involving in child marriage are often suffered by the girls who engage in it.

Some of the effects of early marriage

There are so many effects in engaging in early marriage which includes:

Health risk

Early marriage threatens the health and life of girls. First of all, when a girl is married as a child, she cannot make the decision of when to give birth, the society forces her to give birth at such a tender age. Therefore, complications may arise from pregnancy and child birth, which are the major causes of death among adolescent girls below the age of 19 in Nigeria. Pregnant girls aged 15 to 19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as women in their 20s and girls under the age of 15 are five to seven times more likely to die during childbirth.

Illiteracy and Poverty

Child marriage often ends a girl’s education, in line with this; uneducated girls are more prone to child marriage. Early marriage hinders a young girl’s ability to continue with her education as most drop out of school following marriage to focus their attention on domestic duties and having or raising children. Education, they say is the bedrock of the society.

And a saying goes “Educate a girl child and educate the whole nation. Without education, the female child has fewer opportunities of living her dreams, of becoming someone great in future, of contributing positively, her own quota to the society, thereby making her prone to early marriage. In addition, child marriage leads to poverty in the sense that these girls do not have education, thereby leaving her with fewer opportunities to get a job, earn an income, and financially provide for herself and her children, resulting in poverty.

Kills The Girls’ Dreams

Early or child marriage results in a loss of childhood - Girls are withdrawn from realizing their dreams and aspirations in life, their rights are violated and they lose the ability to choose how their life is fulfilled. The dream of becoming someone great and influential in life is killed through early marriage, as it hinders them from pursuing their education, from getting a degree in school. Early does not give room for the girls to showcase their God’s given talents, it make them only focus their attention on the marriage.

Early marriage deprives them from enjoying real relationship that exists between husband and wife because it serves as boss to subordinate relationship because of the age difference. The girls are not allowed to contribute meaningful ideas to the family as they are seen as nanny or house maids for some kind of domestic duty.

Despite the havoc caused by child marriage, there are ways early marriage can be stop in our environment is enforcement of law prohibiting early marriage, various programmes should be organized by the government, relevant bodies and individuals in order to empower young women, by teaching them on how to start a trade teaching them the importance of education, teaching them a skill through various trainings. Such programmes should be encouraged and available not only in schools, but in communities and rural areas as well.

Child marriage has indeed caused more harm than good as it has stripped many young girls of their childhood, their dreams, their basic human rights and their health, however if we can follow these recommended steps, then, we can be able to eradicate child marriage in our society.

A study conducted by Prakash, R *et al.* (2011) ^[3] on early marriage, poor reproductive health status of mother and child well-being in India. Data from the third wave of National Family Health Survey (NFHS, 2005-2006) was used to examine the effects of early marriage on the reproductive health status of women and on the well-being of their children. Bivariate analyses, multiple linear regression and logistic regression were used for analyses. The results show that early age at marriage had detrimental effects on the reproductive health status of women. Women married at an early age were exposed to frequent childbearing, unplanned motherhood and abortions, which negatively affected their nutritional status. Children born to mothers with poor reproductive health had lower chances of survival and a higher likelihood of anthropometric failure (i.e. stunting, wasting and underweight). Programmes should focus on delaying entry of adolescents into wedlock and motherhood through information, education and communication. More emphasis needs to be put on meeting the reproductive needs of poor

adolescent mothers, and improving the nutritional status of their children, to break the vicious circle of poor reproductive health and poverty.

Challenges to eradicating child marriage

There are numerous reasons of child marriage in India and multiple barriers to its elimination. Illiteracy, Poverty, weak enforcement of laws, patriarchal social norms intended to ensure family honour are significant factors that increase the risk of girl being married off while still a child. Also, girls from poor households are more likely to marry as children, since marriage becomes a solution to reduce the size of the family. The cost of marriage plays a big role in families sliding further into poverty, and these high costs contribute to girls being forced to marry when other ceremonies are taking place in the family or when older siblings are being married.

Major reasons for child marriage

- Limited education opportunities, low quality of education, inadequate infrastructure, lack of transport and therefore concerns about girls’ safety while travelling to school significantly contribute to keeping girls out of school and therefore tend to favour child marriage.
- Although there is widespread awareness of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 (PCMA) and the illegality of child marriage, individually people feel that the traditions and norms are stronger than the law and the institutions and rarely report cases. On top of this, there is limited capacity among officials and lack of willingness to go against community decisions, since officials are themselves part of the community.
- Girls are often seen as a liability with limited economic role and not as responsibility. Woman is always confined to the household work and is not valued. In addition, there is the problem of dowry.
- Law enforcement to prohibit child marriage is relatively weak. Limited detailed knowledge on how to apply laws and little understanding of the consequences of the laws, as well as limited trust in institutions enforcing them, undermines the implementation of the PCMA.
- The families and girls who might benefit from social protection programmes are not always aware of them and these schemes are often limited to providing cash transfers without the accompanying messages to address the multi-dimensional nature of child marriage. The fallout of this is that cash transfers tend to perpetuate dowry, since parents use the grant for that purpose as soon as the girl turns 18 years old.

Child marriage is a violation of child rights, and has a negative impact on physical growth, health, mental and emotional development, and education opportunities.

It also affects society as a whole since child marriage reinforces a cycle of poverty and perpetuates gender discrimination, illiteracy and malnutrition as well as high infant and maternal mortality rates.

UNICEF in Action

UNICEF is working alongside the Government of India in its efforts to prevent child marriage, including the

implementation of the convergent national strategy, which includes:

- **Law enforcement:** Capacity-building on laws, support mechanisms such as a child marriage telephone hotline.
- **Girls' empowerment:** Life skills, protection skills.
- **Community mobilization:** Working with influential leaders, oaths and pledges, counselling, folk and traditional media.
- **Promoting convergence** of sectors at all levels, in particular with education and social protection schemes and programmes.

UNICEF is also working with different and new sectors to ensure a comprehensive approach since child marriage is entrenched in structural problems such as poverty and limited education and vocational opportunities. Partnerships with civil society organizations and communities are key to supporting community mobilization efforts and mind-set changes and partnerships with the media are very important for raising awareness of child marriage.

The UNICEF Fact Sheet on Child Marriage gives a useful outline to the nature of the problem of child marriage; the legislation aimed at ridding it and the government schemes to provide incentives against child marriage; and UNICEF's role in supporting these.

Need of the hour

Raising awareness about the issue is vital because child marriage has been hidden away for centuries and needs to be publicly addressed by the community in order to end the daily suffering of adolescent girls and the continual violation of their human rights. Awareness of reproductive health issues in developing nations is growing. Critical issues are the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS among young people; childbearing by young girls, which can lead to obstetric fistulas and death of the mother; and child marriage.

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