

Protecting Childhood: Policy and Community-Based Interventions Against Early Marriage

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Abstract:

Child marriage remains a pressing global issue, depriving millions of children, especially girls, of their fundamental rights to education, health, and personal development. This article explores the dual approach of policy frameworks and community-based interventions as critical strategies to combat child marriage. It highlights the role of legislative measures, grassroots activism, education, and economic empowerment in addressing the root causes and mitigating the consequences of early marriage. The study emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and inclusive stakeholder engagement in designing effective interventions, offering a roadmap for sustainable change. Child marriage has other negative effects on girls' mental health as well. There is a strong correlation between many types of gender-based violence, such as forced marriage and intimate partner abuse, and the increased risk of depression and suicidal thoughts among girls who are engaged or married at a young age. Marriage at a young age not only prevents a kid from finishing high school, but it also forces them into low-paying, precarious occupations since they can't work as much after giving birth and taking care of the child. Early marriage for girls reduces their lifetime earnings by more than nine percent, which is a big effect. Reducing the prevalence of child marriage has been associated with increased productivity and income.

Keywords: *Child Marriage.*

Introduction:

Child marriage, defined as any formal or informal union where one or both parties are under 18 years of age, affects approximately 12 million girls annually. Despite global efforts to curb the practice, it persists due to entrenched cultural norms, poverty, gender inequality, and inadequate legal enforcement. This article examines the intersection of policy and community-based efforts in preventing child marriage and promoting child rights. It focuses on successful models and the lessons they provide for global application.

Child marriage has become more common in households experiencing forced migration in recent years. Among the 7.8 billion individuals on Earth, 5% were married before the age of 15 and 20% were married between the ages of 20 and 24. Between the ages of 20 and 24, over a third of South Asian females said they were married before becoming 18 and 8 percent said they were married before turning 15. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations have the greatest prevalence rates of child marriage among 20-24-year-olds. Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, and India follow closely behind (UNICEF 2020).

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Although the average age of marriage is over 18 in most countries, the highest rates of child marriage are still found in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Singh and Samara 1996; Mensch, et al. 2006), even though this trend is happening globally. The highest concentration of married women under the age of 18 was in South Asia, where it stood at 21% in 2020 (UNICEF 2020). When it comes to the number of child brides in South Asia, the two nations with the highest numbers are Bangladesh and India (Girls Not Brides, 2020). Vulnerabilities among youngsters, especially females, have grown exponentially due to the current global COVID-19 epidemic. According to updated statistics on female education released by UNESCO in 2021, the ongoing epidemic may prevent 11 million girls from ever returning to school. An additional consequence of the epidemic and the resulting economic crisis would be the continuous rise in the number of cases of child marriage. A further thirteen million children may be wed at a young age in the next decade as a result of the epidemic, according to projections (Anon 2020). The current push to end child marriage is jeopardised by the COVID-19 pandemic. By the decade's end, COVID-19 could have contributed to an extra 10 million child marriages (UNICEF 2021). As a result of social isolation and limitations imposed by the pandemic, women are more likely to be victims of gender-based abuse, child marriage, and unintended pregnancies (ibid).

Objectives: This article explores the dual approach of policy frameworks and community-based interventions as critical strategies to combat child marriage. It highlights the role of legislative measures, grassroots activism, education, and economic empowerment in addressing the root causes and mitigating the consequences of early marriage.

Significance of the Study: The study *Protecting Childhood: Policy and Community-Based Interventions Against Early Marriage* is highly significant in advancing the global fight against child marriage. It provides a comprehensive framework for addressing this pervasive issue, balancing top-down policy interventions with grassroots community engagement. By doing so, it not only safeguards the rights and futures of millions of children but also contributes to achieving broader goals of equality, development, and social justice.

The Drivers of Child Marriage:

Child marriage is perpetuated by multiple, interconnected factors:

Financial constraints: Households in low and medium income countries are less likely to invest in alternatives for girls, such as education and vocational training, which contribute to a higher child marriage rate. When girls already have challenges obtaining sufficient money, the added pressure of having to deal with marriage decisions made by their families compounds the problem. Santhya, Haberland, and Singh (2006) listed poverty and the financial strain of marriage as two of the main causes of child marriage at a young age. If parents see their daughters as a financial burden, they may weigh the pros and cons of marriage and choose to wed them at a young age. This behaviour is also influenced by financial transactions that occur during marriage. Families may get more money for younger brides in some instances. As a result, many families choose to wed their daughters before the age of 18 is officially recognised by law. Parents may be encouraged to marry off their daughters at a younger age if dowry is practiced, since a younger and less educated bride may demand a smaller payment (Parsons, Edmeades, Kes, Petroni, Sexton and Quentin 2015:13).

Educational attainment: The degree of education a woman has is the single most important factor lowering the prevalence of child marriage, according to a number of studies. The prevalence of child marriage decreases as educational attainment rises. Kamal, Hassan, Alam, and Ying (2014) found that compared to girls and women without formal education, those with secondary or higher education were far less likely to be wed off as minors. However, there are two obstacles to girls' education: the lack of educational options for girls in rural regions and the community's perception of the importance of a girl's education. Parents are

discouraged from sending their daughters to school because they perceive no return on investment in their education. The lack of educational opportunities for girls is not limited to formal school infrastructure, but also includes informal educational structures and vocational training programs. This makes it difficult for girls to acquire skills that could be useful for earning income (Pandey et.al. 2019).

Livelihood opportunities: According to Kamal, Hassan, Alam and Ying (2014):17, compared to women who were jobless, those working in professional occupations had a lower likelihood of being married off as children, whereas those working in menial employment had a far higher likelihood. Having a job opens women's minds to new ideas and social mores, which can delay marriage till later in life. Additionally, parents may have an economic motive to urge their daughters to stay single throughout the economically productive era of early adulthood if they can give them with the financial means to delay marriage. However, in many communities, females are expected to stay at home and take care of their younger siblings, manage the household, and work on the family farm or business. They are not allowed to work outside the home. Because, generally speaking, there aren't many different kinds of occupations in these places, females don't have many options. Many communities forbid girls from going outside, which makes it much more difficult for them to get paid employment (Pandey et.al. 2019).

Social background and cultural practices: Another reason that people often provide for the continuation of child marriage is the need to conform to social standards. Although parents unconsciously adopt these standards, community members and even strangers put pressure on parents to wed their daughters at an early age (Santhya, Haberland and Singh 2006:10). According to the Planning Commission (2014), child marriage is considered sacrosanct by the individuals who engage in it because of these long-established customs as well as underlying cultural and religious practices. Some societies have a historically poor opinion of women and hold the view that a girl's only real potential is to marry off her reproductive organs and take care of her husband and children. The upshot is a preference for educating boys over girls, who face greater risks of unanticipated consequences including child marriage and unplanned pregnancies (UNICEF 2020).

Policy Interventions:

Enforcing a Minimum Legal Age of 18 for Marriage, with No Exceptions: Setting the legal age for marriage at 18 aligns with international standards such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensures legal protection for minors. In many countries, child marriages are permitted under customary, religious, or parental consent clauses. These loopholes undermine broader efforts to combat child marriage. Communities with deeply entrenched traditions may resist such laws. Uniform national laws must clearly define 18 as the minimum age for marriage, overriding exceptions under customary or religious practices. Community engagement campaigns can help build local support for these reforms by demonstrating the harm caused by child marriage.

Strengthening Penalties for Facilitators of Child Marriage: Those who facilitate child marriage—parents, guardians, religious leaders, or community members—often escape consequences due to weak or unenforced penalties. Enforcement is often weak, especially in rural areas where local norms overshadow state laws. Victims are reluctant to report cases due to fear of stigma or family backlash. Increase penalties for individuals, officials, or institutions that arrange, facilitate, or officiate child marriages. Create public awareness about these penalties to deter offenders.

Establishing Mechanisms to Track and Report Child Marriage Cases: Many cases of child marriage go unreported, especially in remote areas where oversight is weak. Accurate data is essential to design targeted interventions and measure progress. Develop **child protection registries** to document and track cases of child marriage at local, regional, and national levels. Create **anonymous reporting systems** (e.g., help lines, mobile apps) to allow community members to report suspected cases safely. Partner with local authorities, schools, and healthcare providers to identify at-risk children and intervene early.

Training Law Enforcement and Judicial Systems: Law enforcement officials and judicial personnel often lack the training to handle child marriage cases sensitively, leading to victim-blaming, reluctance to act, or mishandling of cases. Train police, judges, and prosecutors to handle child marriage cases with sensitivity and respect for the victims. Introduce **specialized child protection units** within law enforcement to address such cases effectively. Ensure that judicial processes are child-friendly, minimizing trauma for victims during legal proceedings.

Community-Based Interventions:

While policies create an enabling environment, grassroots efforts address the social and cultural roots of child marriage. Effective community-based strategies include:

1. Engaging Community Leaders:

- Traditional and religious leaders often hold significant influence. Educating them about the harms of child marriage can lead to community-wide behavioral shifts.

2. Empowering Girls:

- Initiatives such as girls' clubs provide safe spaces to discuss rights, health, and education.
- Skills training and financial literacy programs increase girls' agency and economic independence.

3. Parental Engagement:

- Awareness campaigns targeting parents emphasize the long-term benefits of delaying marriage and investing in education.

4. Economic Support:

- Conditional cash transfers or scholarships for families can incentivize keeping girls in school.
- Community savings groups help families overcome financial hardships that drive early marriage.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Ending child marriage requires a multi-faceted approach that combines robust policies with grassroots efforts. Governments must strengthen legal frameworks and ensure their enforcement, while community initiatives address cultural and economic drivers. Education and economic empowerment are foundational to breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality that fuels child marriage. Collaboration among governments, NGOs, and local communities is essential to protect childhood and secure a brighter future for vulnerable children worldwide.

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