

THE RIPPLE EFFECTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE ON CHILDREN'S LIFE AND INDIAN SOCIETY

*By Avinash Kumar Bhati**

ABSTRACT

Drawing from a global perspective, the issue of child marriages unravels the deep-rooted factors that perpetuate this practice while scrutinizing the societal impacts it imposes on both present and forthcoming generations. Its repercussions span across health, education, and human rights, necessitating a comprehensive examination of this pressing issue. Developed nations, recognizing the urgency of eradicating child marriage, have championed legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and international collaborations. These concerted efforts reflect a commitment to upholding the rights and well-being of children, irrespective of geographic boundaries. Within India, a nation emblematic of this challenge, a formidable arsenal of legal reforms, educational initiatives, and grassroots interventions stands as a testament to the determination to combat child marriage. Yet, the shadows of cultural practices persist, demanding continued uniqueness and dedication to effect lasting change. This research paper seeks to shed light on these ripple effects, unearthing the hidden layers of child marriage's impact on children's lives and the broader communities and societies they are part of.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Society, Ripple Effect, Minor marriage, Education etc.

* Assistant Professor of Law, ICFAI University Jharkhand.

1. INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a deeply entrenched and alarming issue which create a dark shadow over the lives of young girls and boys. It is generally defined as the marriage of boy and girl who are under the age of 21 and 18 years respectively. It robs these minors of their most precious childhood.¹ However, the consequences of child marriage go far beyond the confines of early unions which affect not only the child's life but also have a cascading effect over the society. This ripple outwards, impacting not only the lives of the children involved but also the very fabric of the societies they inhabit.

The issue of child marriage isn't limited to a single region or culture; it is a societal phenomenon.² It affects communities in various corners of the globe, from South Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa, from the Middle East to several parts of Latin America.³ In southern Asia, child marriage is often driven by a combination of cultural norms, economic factors, and gender inequality. Sub-Saharan Africa sees high child marriage rates, partly due to traditions and the practice's role in social and economic systems. In the Middle East, child marriage can be influenced by both cultural practices and economic considerations.

Child marriage is not a uniform issue; its prevalence and causes vary across regions and cultures. In some parts of the world, economic hardships, gender inequality, and cultural traditions perpetuate this practice. Understanding these factors is crucial for comprehending child marriage's broader societal consequences.⁴ To comprehend its societal consequences fully, it is required to explore the factors that contribute to the persistence of this practice.

In many societies, child marriage is deeply ingrained in tradition and culture.⁵ This issue is not limited to a particular religion, rather historical perspectives give references to child marriage practices in all religions. It may be seen as a rite of passage or a way to preserve family honour. The poverty also plays a significant role in perpetuating child marriage.⁶

¹ Scolaro, Elisa, et al. "Child marriage legislation in the Asia-Pacific region." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13.3 (2015): 23-31.

² Naghizadeh, Somayyeh, et al. "Knowledge and viewpoint of adolescent girls regarding child marriage, its causes and consequences." *BMC women's health* 21.1 (2021): 1-10.

³ Singh, Susheela, and Renee Samara. "Early marriage among women in developing countries." *International family planning perspectives* (1996): 148-175.

⁴ *Supra* Note 2.

⁵ Jones, Nicola, et al. "Early marriage and education: the complex role of social norms in shaping Ethiopian adolescent girls' lives." *Country Report: Shaping policy for development* (2014): 1-103.

⁶ Parsons, Jennifer, et al. "Economic impacts of child marriage: a review of the literature." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13.3 (2015): 12-22.

Families in dire economic situations may view marrying off their daughters as a means of reducing their financial burden. In regions affected by conflict or displacement, child marriage rates tend to rise. Families facing instability may marry off their children as a survival strategy. Furthermore, the gender discrimination is a pervasive issue in societies where child marriage is common. Girls are often seen as less valuable than boys and are married off at a younger age. The limited access to education, particularly for girls contribute to child marriage. When educational opportunities are scarce, families often opt for early marriages of their children.

2. PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE PRACTICES

Child marriage has been practiced or continues to be a concern around the globe in several nations. This practice is more predominant in developing and underdeveloped nations where there are many lacunas and availability of opportunities. In African counties such as Niger⁷, Yemen⁸, Malawi⁹, Ethiopia¹⁰, Nigeria¹¹ etc. These countries rank among the countries with the highest rates of child marriage. Economic hardship, cultural norms, exacerbated by conflict and displacement and limited access to education to people in these countries' region contribute to this practice. Such similar observations can be made in Asian and Indian neighbouring countries including Nepal¹², Bangladesh¹³, Mali¹⁴, Afghanistan¹⁵ etc. Child marriage is a concern in these countries particularly in remote, rural and marginalized communities. India has one of the highest rates of child marriage globally. Despite legal reforms, child marriage is still prevalent in some rural and economically disadvantaged areas, particularly in states like Rajasthan, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh.

⁷ John, Neetu A., Jeffrey Edmeades, and Lydia Murithi. "Child marriage and psychological well-being in Niger and Ethiopia." *BMC public health* 19 (2019): 1-12.

⁸ Hunersen, Kara, et al. "Child marriage in Yemen: a mixed methods study in ongoing conflict and displacement." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34.4 (2021): 4551-4571.

⁹ Mwambene, Lea, and Obdiah Mwaodza. "Children's rights standards and child marriage in Malawi." (2017).

¹⁰ Marshall, Elizabeth Presler, et al. "Child marriage in Ethiopia." *London: Overseas Development Institute (ODI)* (2016). See also Erulkar, Annabel. "Changes in the prevalence of child marriage in Ethiopia, 2005–2016." *Reproductive Health* 19.Suppl 1 (2022): 195.

¹¹ Fayokun, Kayode Olatunbosun. "Legality of child marriage in Nigeria and inhibitions against realisation of education rights." *US-China L. Rev.* 12 (2015): 812.

¹² Thapa, Shyam. "Girl child marriage in Nepal: Its prevalence and correlates." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 23.2 (1996): 361-375.

¹³ Kamal, SM Mostafa, et al. "Child marriage in Bangladesh: trends and determinants." *Journal of biosocial Science* 47.1 (2015): 120-139.

¹⁴ Zegeye, Betregiorgis, et al. "Individual/household and community-level factors associated with child marriage in mali: evidence from demographic and health survey." *BioMed Research International* 2021 (2021).

¹⁵ Bahgam, S., and W. Mukhatari. "Study on Child marriage in Afghanistan." *MedicaMondiale*, May (2004).

The practice of child marriage was also prevalent in developed nations, but with time and due to developments, they had overcome this issue. Here's a brief overview of how child marriage was addressed in some developed nations:

1. United States: In the 19th and early 20th centuries, child marriage was not uncommon in the United States, particularly in rural areas. However, over time, legal reforms were enacted in all states to set a minimum age for marriage, typically 18 years, and often with exceptions for parental consent or judicial approval.¹⁶
2. United Kingdom: The United Kingdom historically allowed child marriage, but legal reforms in the mid-20th century set the minimum age for marriage at 16, with parental consent required for those under 18. Efforts to further tighten regulations have been discussed in recent years.¹⁷
3. Canada: Canada has also seen a decline in child marriage. The minimum age for marriage is typically set at 16 or 18, with parental consent required for those under 18.¹⁸
4. Australia: Australia addressed child marriage through legal reforms. The minimum legal age for marriage varies by state but is typically set at 18, with exceptions for those aged 16 or 17 with parental and court consent.¹⁹
5. European Countries: In European Union member states, the minimum age for marriage varies but generally ranges from 16 to 18 years. Many countries have increased the minimum age in recent years to align with international standards.

In developed nations, child marriage was more prevalent in the past, often due to economic and social conditions that have since improved. Legal reforms have played a crucial role in setting age limits for marriage and preventing underage unions. Additionally, societal shifts toward valuing education, gender equality, and individual rights have contributed to the

¹⁶ Koski, Alissa, and Jody Heymann. "Child marriage in the United States: How common is the practice, and which children are at greatest risk?." *Perspectives on sexual and reproductive health* 50.2 (2018): 59-65.

¹⁷ Arthur, Megan, et al. "Child marriage laws around the world: Minimum marriage age, legal exceptions, and gender disparities." *Journal of women, politics & policy* 39.1 (2018): 51-74.

¹⁸ Zaman, Michele, and Alissa Koski. "Child marriage in Canada: A systematic review." *PLoS One* 15.3 (2020): e0229676. See also Robles, Marcy J. "Child Marriage and the Failure of International Law: a Comparison of American, Indian, and Canadian Domestic Policies." *International and Comparative Law Review* 18.1 (2018): 105-125.

¹⁹ Chadha, Vaibhav, and Uddhav Tiwari. "Legal efforts to curb child marriage in India, USA and Australia: A comparative analysis." *The Age of Human Rights Journal* 18 (2022): 463-489.

decline of child marriage in developed countries. Nevertheless, challenges and exceptions may still exist, and ongoing efforts are required to ensure the protection of children's rights.

3. CONSEQUENCES ON SOCIETY

The societal consequences of child marriage are profound and multifaceted. Economically, it perpetuates poverty as child brides are unable to contribute significantly to their households. It also hampers women's empowerment, as child brides are denied the chance to pursue education and economic independence. Health and demographic repercussions include the increased risks to maternal and child health and the challenges posed by rapid population growth. Child marriage is also a gross violation of human rights, and legal frameworks and international efforts aim to address this issue. Child marriage has profound and far-reaching societal consequences that extend beyond the individuals involved. These consequences can vary depending on the specific cultural, economic, and social contexts in which child marriage occurs. Here are some of the key societal consequences of child marriage:

Child marriage perpetuates and reinforces existing gender inequalities within societies. It often stems from patriarchal norms and practices that view girls as less valuable than boys. By allowing child marriage to continue, societies condone and uphold these unequal power dynamics. Child brides often face economic dependence on their husbands and in-laws, making it difficult for them to escape abusive or exploitative situations. This can also strain the economic resources of families and communities, particularly in cases where dowry or bride price is involved. Child marriage has significant consequences on both present and upcoming societies. These consequences can hinder social and economic development, perpetuate gender inequality, and pose challenges to the well-being of future generations.

Present Society Consequences:

1. **Healthcare Burden:** Presently, societies with high rates of child marriage often bear the burden of increased healthcare costs due to maternal and child health complications. Child brides are at higher risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth, which strains healthcare systems and resources.
2. **Educational Disruption:** Child marriage disrupts the education of affected children, particularly girls. This can lead to a less educated workforce, limiting the potential for economic growth and development.

3. **Economic Implications:** Child marriage perpetuates poverty within communities and nations. Child brides, unable to contribute significantly to their households, are often dependent on their husbands' families. This economic dependency can strain resources and limit overall economic progress.
4. **Gender Inequality:** Child marriage reinforces gender inequality within societies. It is often rooted in patriarchal norms and practices that devalue girls and women. Addressing this inequality is essential for building more equitable societies.
5. **Legal and Human Rights Challenges:** Societies with high rates of child marriage often face legal and human rights challenges. Child marriage is a violation of basic human rights, including the right to life, liberty, and security of the person. It also violates international agreements and conventions.

Upcoming Society Consequences:

1. **Interference with Development Goals:** Child marriage can hinder progress toward various development goals, including those related to education, health, gender equality, and poverty reduction. It can become a barrier to achieving sustainable development.
2. **Population Growth Challenges:** High rates of child marriage contribute to rapid population growth, which can strain resources, infrastructure, and social services. This demographic challenge can affect the quality of life for future generations.
3. **Transmission of Norms:** Child marriage often perpetuates harmful gender norms and practices, passing them down to future generations. These norms can continue to influence behavior and attitudes within communities.
4. **Intergenerational Cycle:** Child marriage can establish an intergenerational cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Children born to young mothers are more likely to experience poverty and limited access to education and healthcare, perpetuating the cycle.
5. **Social and Economic Consequences for Children:** The children of child brides often face disadvantages, including a higher risk of malnutrition, poor health, and limited access to education. These challenges can hinder their future opportunities and well-being.

4. EFFECTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE ON CHILDREN

Child marriage affects both boys and girls, but the problems they face after early marriage can differ due to gender roles, societal expectations, and cultural norms. Here are some key distinctions in the problems faced by boys and girls after early marriage:

Issues Faced by Girls After Early Marriage:

1. **Health Risks During Pregnancy and Childbirth:** Child brides, especially girls, face significant health risks during early pregnancies and childbirth due to their bodies not being fully developed. They are at a higher risk of complications, maternal mortality, and delivering low-birth-weight babies.
2. **Limited Educational Opportunities:** Girls who are married at a young age often have their education interrupted or discontinued. They are expected to fulfill domestic roles, which can restrict their access to schooling and limit their future career prospects.
3. **Gender Inequality and Discrimination:** Girls in child marriages are often subjected to gender-based discrimination and unequal power dynamics within their marriages. They may have little say in household decisions and may be expected to conform to traditional gender roles.
4. **Social Isolation:** Child brides are frequently isolated from their families, friends, and communities as they move into their husband's homes. This isolation can result in the loss of social networks and support systems.
5. **Emotional and Psychological Stress:** Early marriage can subject girls to emotional and psychological stress, including feelings of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem as they navigate adult responsibilities without adequate emotional support.

Issues Faced by Boys After Early Marriage:

1. **Economic Responsibility:** Young husbands in child marriages often face the economic pressure of providing for their families at an early age. They may struggle to find stable employment and financial security, which can be particularly challenging.
2. **Limited Educational and Career Opportunities:** Early marriage can interrupt a boy's education and limit his ability to pursue higher education or vocational training. This can restrict his career options and earning potential.

3. **Psychological Stress:** Boys in early marriages may experience psychological stress due to the responsibilities and expectations of married life at a young age. They may feel unprepared for the emotional and financial burdens of a family.
4. **Social Expectations:** In some cultures, young husbands are expected to demonstrate their ability to support a family soon after marriage. These societal expectations can create stress and pressure to conform to traditional roles.
5. **Gender Expectations:** Boys may also face societal expectations related to masculinity and traditional gender roles within marriage. These expectations can influence their behaviour and interactions within the family.

It's important to note that both boys and girls in child marriages face a range of challenges and disadvantages. However, the specific problems they encounter may vary based on cultural, regional, and individual factors. Efforts to address child marriage should consider the unique needs and vulnerabilities of both genders to ensure that interventions are effective and equitable.

5. MEASURES TO COMBAT CHILD MARRIAGE

The fight against child marriage is ongoing. International organizations, governments, and local communities are working together to combat this harmful practice. Initiatives include awareness campaigns, legal reforms, and community-based interventions. Progress is being made, but there is much work to be done to eradicate child marriage and mitigate its societal consequences. Developed nations have taken various measures and implemented changes to help eradicate child marriage, both domestically and through international efforts. Here are some of the key changes and actions made by developed nations:

1. **Legal Reforms:** Many developed nations have established or updated their legal frameworks to set a minimum age for marriage. These laws often include provisions that require parental consent or judicial approval for marriages involving minors.
2. **Awareness Campaigns:** Developed nations have supported awareness campaigns both within their borders and internationally to raise awareness about the harms of child marriage. These campaigns aim to change societal attitudes and norms surrounding early marriage.

3. **International Agreements:** Developed nations have been active participants in international agreements and conventions that address child marriage. For example, they have supported and ratified agreements like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which include provisions related to child marriage.
4. **Development Assistance:** Developed nations provide development assistance and funding to support programs aimed at eradicating child marriage in developing countries. These programs often focus on education, healthcare, gender equality, and legal reforms.
5. **Support for NGOs and Civil Society:** Developed nations often provide support to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations that work on the ground to combat child marriage. This support includes funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building.
6. **Data Collection and Research:** Developed nations invest in research and data collection efforts to better understand the prevalence and underlying factors of child marriage. This data informs evidence-based policies and interventions.
7. **Advocacy and Diplomacy:** Developed nations engage in advocacy and diplomacy at the international level to encourage other countries to take action against child marriage. They use their diplomatic influence to promote legal reforms and policy changes in regions where child marriage is prevalent.
8. **Educational Initiatives:** Supporting education, particularly for girls, is a key strategy. Many developed nations fund programs that aim to improve access to quality education, especially for girls in regions with high child marriage rates.
9. **Empowerment of Women and Girls:** Promoting the empowerment of women and girls is a central focus. This includes initiatives that provide skills training, economic opportunities, and access to reproductive health services.
10. **Research and Evaluation:** Developed nations invest in research and evaluation to assess the effectiveness of interventions and initiatives aimed at eradicating child marriage. This allows for the refinement of strategies and approaches over time.

It's important to note that the efforts of developed nations are often carried out in collaboration with international organizations, other governments, and local partners. The

goal is to create a comprehensive and coordinated approach to combat child marriage globally and work towards its eradication.

6. CONCLUSION

Child marriage, a deeply entrenched global issue, exerts a profound influence on societies, impacting the present and casting shadows on the future. Across continents and cultures, this practice persists, driven by a complex interplay of economic hardships, cultural traditions, and gender inequality. Its societal consequences are far-reaching, touching upon health, education, gender equality, and human rights. In developed nations and developing countries alike, the fight against child marriage has gained momentum. Legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and international agreements stand as beacons of hope. Developed nations, recognizing the urgency of this challenge, have lent their support to global efforts, providing funding, expertise, and advocacy to combat child marriage on a global scale.

In countries like India, legal frameworks, education initiatives, and awareness campaigns have made significant strides in addressing child marriage. Yet, challenges persist, requiring continued dedication and innovation to break free from deeply ingrained cultural practices and societal norms. Child marriage is not just a problem; it is a collective responsibility. The future of societies hinges on our commitment to protecting the rights and well-being of children. The intergenerational cycle of poverty and inequality can be broken, and children can be given the opportunity to reclaim their childhoods and pursue brighter futures.

As we reflect on the far-reaching consequences of child marriage, let us be reminded of the resilience and potential of every child. Together, through legal reforms, education, and empowerment, we can work towards a future where every child's rights are upheld, where gender equality prevails, and where societies thrive in the absence of this harmful practice. In the collective effort to eradicate child marriage, we pave the way for a more equitable, healthier, and prosperous world.
