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An outline of child marriage during COVID-19 in Karnataka, India

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Abstract---General Child marriage situation pre-covid, why increased during covid, causes, reflection from selected communities. Many socio-economic evils deprives numerous children from their right to healthy and safe nurturing environment. One such evil is the child marriage practised from age old days and yet not eradicated. UNICEF defines child marriage or early marriage as the union of a girl or boy under the age of 18 years which encompasses both official weddings and informal cohabitations in which children under the age of 18 live as if they were married. According to UNICEF, 110 million child marriages occurred from 2011 to 2021 worldwide and 25 million were averted during the same time frame (UNICEF, 2021b). In spite of being a pioneer in the battle against child marriage, India still has 15.6 million women between the ages of 20 and 24 who were married before they turned 18. There are 223 million child brides in India, with 102 million of them marrying before the age of 15. In terms of the prevalence of child marriage, these data rank India fourth in South Asia (UNICEF, 2019).

Keywords---child marriage, COVID-19, pandemic situation, UNICEF, child brides.

Introduction

According to UNICEF, 2019 data, only five states account for more than half of India's child brides - Uttar Pradesh (36 million), Bihar (22 million), West Bengal (22 million), Maharashtra (20 million), and Madhya Pradesh (16 million). Bihar has the highest frequency of child marriages (43%) while Lakshadweep has the lowest prevalence (2%). Andhra Pradesh (34%) has the highest percentage of women aged 20 to 24 who were first married or in a union before the age of 18, followed by Telangana (27%) Karnataka (24%) Tamil Nadu (16%), and Kerala (8%) (UNICEF, 2019).

According to the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16), 23.2 percent of women aged 20 to 24 were married off before they turned 18. In Karnataka's urban regions, the ratio was 16.7%, while in rural areas, it was 24.8 percent. In 27 of Karnataka's 31 districts, child marriage is common. The incidence of child marriage differs by 66 percentage points across the areas with the highest and lowest rates. Bagalkot district had the highest percentages of married girls aged 10–14 and 15–19 (3.91 percent and 32.45 percent, respectively), followed by Bijapur (3.62 percent and 28.87 percent, respectively), Chamrajnagar (2.75 percent and 26.85 percent, respectively), and Belgaum (2.75 percent and 26.85 percent, respectively) according to the 2011 census (CRY, 2020). Furthermore, metropolitan districts like Bangalore urban (4.49 percent and 20.44 percent, respectively) and Mysore (2.78 percent and 22.16 percent, respectively) had higher percentages than rural districts.

The aggravated socio-economic problems due to Covid-19 has a major effect on the global goal of ending child marriage by 2030. Pandemic poses a threat to the future generation, especially for the most vulnerable sectors of the society and for girls and young women far worse than boys. Because of their lack of connectivity and access to technology, many young people have been left out of the move to online education. Unemployment rates in the post-Covid-19 era are greater among young people than older people, and among women than males. Increased violence, increased signs of mental illness, and restricted access to health services, especially those that the young need the most: menstrual health supplies, contraception, pregnancy-related and other reproductive care, and mental health counselling, are all noted.

Pre-covid progress made in combating child marriage

The percentage of girls married under 15 reduced from 12 per cent to 8 per cent in the past three decades, worldwide (theirworld.org). Globally, the proportion of young women married as children has declined by 15% in the last decade, from roughly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5. This indicates that 25 million girls' weddings have been avoided in the previous ten years. The average yearly rate of decrease of child marriage is 0.7 per cent during the last 25 years and 1.9 per cent in the last decade (UNICEF, 2021b).

This is a result of the joint efforts of development organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), campaigns against child marriage embarked by various activist

groups and NGO's, and government's active enforcement of legal provisions against child marriage. Interventions aiming at empowerment, economic growth and schooling of girls and women has also been a contributing factor in lowering the child marriage rates (Chae and Ngo, 2017).

South Asia has witnessed a decrease in number of child brides by 20 per cent over the last 10 years. Among South Asian Countries, Maldives has shown a whopping yearly rate of reduction of child marriage of 21.2 percent, whereas in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan the annual reduction rate was ranging from 3 to 5 per cent and rest of the countries it was below 3 per cent. Sub-Saharan Africa has also made progress in reducing the number of child brides to one in seven from one in three over the last two decades (UNICEF, 2019). A remarkable reduction of child marriage by more than 20 per cent due to improved levels of education is observed in Ethiopia. Many countries have shown their commitments to end the evil practice of child marriage by addressing the loopholes in their laws. Many countries like India, Honduras, Costa Rica, Malawi and Nepal have criminalized the act of child marriage. In El Salvador, the legal ambiguity of permitting men to marry underage girls they had made pregnant was closed (theirworld.org and atlas.girlsnotbrides.org).

A closer look into India's scenario reveals the constant effort made by India. India's average annual rate of reduction of child marriage is 5.5 per cent and has shown the strongest progress compared to other countries in South Asia region (UNICEF, 2019). A comparison of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data of 2005-06 and 2015-16, a 30 per cent decline in the number of child marriages was observed when women of age 20 to 24 years old were surveyed (Young lives India, 2018). States like Bihar, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka reduced the cases of child marriage by 20 per cent from 2005 to 2015.

In Karnataka, according to National Family Health Survey (2016) data a sharp decline in child marriage in the last decade, from 50.1 per cent of girls getting married before the age of 18 in 2005- 2006 to 24.7 per cent in 2015-2016. At the same time, urban areas fell from 28.5 percent to 21.3 percent. This has been accompanied by an increase in the median age of marriage, from 16.7 years in 2005-2006 to 18.1 years for women in 2015-2016 (Paul, 2020). Urban Karnataka, on the other hand, showed a decrease in poverty from 28.5 percent in 2005-06 to 21.3 percent in 2019-20. (NFHS-5). While there has been some improvement, the problem is far from fixed, and it will take a concerted effort on numerous fronts to see things change.

UNICEF's pre-covid projection of child marriages occurring in the world from 2021 to 2030 is 100 million. Additional 7 to 10 million child marriages have been predicted globally as a result of the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021b). Similarly, UNFPA has projected an additional 13 million early marriages for the next decade, of which 7.4 million is due to decelerated interventions and the remaining is because of worldwide economic depression. It also projected about 10 million children may discontinue their studies, mostly girls being affected (UNFPA, 2020). A large portion of this projected value is predicted to occur in South Asia and the estimated value of additional girls at risk of child marriage in a single year is

191,200 and in next five years is 956,000 (Save the children, 2020). The values for various region in the world is provided in the following table.

Region	Girls at risk of child marriage before COVID-19	Additional girls at risk of child marriage	
	5 years	1 year	5 year
East Asia and the Pacific	5,104,000	61,000	305,000
East and Southern Africa	8,630,000	31,600	158,000
Europe and Central Asia	1,427,000	37,200	186,000
Latin America and the Caribbean	7,029,000	73,400	367,000
Middle East and North Africa	2,954,000	14,400	72,000
South Asia	23,196,000	191,200	956,000
West and Central Africa	10,023,000	90,000	450,000
World	58,363,000	498,000	2,490,000

Note: Estimates are the upper limits of a range. They are, nevertheless, likely to be underestimate

32,403,000 girls were at risk of adolescent pregnancy before COVID-19 in the world and 8,666,000 in South Asia. Due to the pandemic it is estimated that additional 1,041,000 in the world and 138,000 in the South Asia girls are at risk of adolescent pregnancy. These estimates are nevertheless likely to be underestimate of the situation (Save the Children, 2020). Poverty in urban Karnataka, on the other hand, fell from 28.5 percent in 2005-06 to 21.3 percent in 2019-20. (NFHS-5). While there has been some progress, the situation is far from solved, and changing things will need a dedicated effort on several fronts

According to estimates, the pandemic may leave 130 million additional people without adequate food in 2020. (Global report on food crises, 2020) Many of them will be girls, which is doubly unfortunate because in some homes, females are more prone than men and boys to be hungry (World Food programme, 2020). Girls are already more vulnerable to sexual exploitation than boys. Since the epidemic began, reports on situations in humanitarian settings have described incidences of sexual exploitation to achieve basic requirements (Global Protection Cluster, 2020). Girls are also more likely to take on care obligations for siblings who require home schooling, as well as family members who become ill or work outside the house.

Gender-based violence, including harmful practises like child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM); sexual exploitation; intimate partner violence and domestic family violence, exacerbated by lockdown; and increased violence

outside the home, linked to school closures and crises, is expected to rise globally. COVID-19 disruptions to efforts to reduce gender-based violence and access to services for women and girls, such as shelters and helplines, are expected to result in a one-third reduction in progress by 2030 and an additional 2 million cases of female genital mutilation (primarily among girls) over the next ten years (UNFPA, 2020).

India

India also witnessed an increase in child marriage along with other forms of child abuse during the pandemic. The unexpected lockdown in March and April of 2020 reduced the number of cases of child marriage. However, soon after the relaxation of the lockdown restriction, the cases drastically increased and continued to remain higher than 2019. An increase of 33 per cent was observed from June to October, 2020 and 88 per cent increase in the month of August alone as compared to previous year (the wire 2021).

According to CHILDLINE data, 5,584 phone calls were received during the 2020 lockdown period alone to prevent child marriage. Of the total phone calls, nearly 2000 cases were categorised under child-protection from Abuse and Violence (PFA), about 5000 cases involved girls of and the remaining involved boys. Among the total interventions involving girls, 39 per cent were aged between 11 to 15 years and 60 per cent were aged 16 to 18 years. The top five states to report child marriage during the first three months of lockdown were Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Telangana and nearly 29 per cent of interventions during this period was in Karnataka (ANI 2020; Times of India, 2020; Times of India, 2021 the Lost generation; Bahl, Bassi and Arora 2020).

Apart from centre data, several studies were also conducted in different regions of India. One such study in Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh revealed that 3 per cent of youth surveyed were forced to drop out of school in order to get married and in Uttar Pradesh the percentage was high (Population Foundation of India 2020). In an online poll conducted in August 2020, 9% of youth-serving organisations in India said they had been notified about a girl whose marriage was due to be performed in the previous five months (since the enforcement of the lockdown) (Dasra 2020).

Many weddings were thought to have taken place behind closed doors or without being recorded. Even still, from the beginning of the lockdown, an increase in child marriage was visible. Even states with low rates of child marriage, like as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, have started reporting them (India forum, 2021). During the pandemic, minor girls are being groomed for marriage by older men using the social media platform (Save the children, 2021).

Karnataka

Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (KSCPCR) reported a total of 2,180 child marriage cases from April 2020 to January 2021 from Childline data alone. Two months after into the lockdown that is in May, an alarming number of complaints (579) were received and in later months the cases

reported reduced as the lockdown restrictions were relaxed. About 50 per cent of the complaints were received from November 2020 to January 2021 (The Hindu, 2021 K C Deepika).

According to Women and Child Welfare Department of Karnataka, 188 child marriages were held and 2074 were prevented between February and November 2020. Bellary stands first with 218 cases being averted by the department, followed by Mysore (177), Belagavi (131) and Chikkaballapura and Chitradurga (170 each). On other hand, in districts like Hassan, Mandya, Mysore, Belagavi and Ramanagara high number of child marriages were held during the same period and even in metropolitan city like Bengaluru, 20 cases were stopped and 5 were conducted (Times of India, 2021 Sunitha Roa R). These numbers represents only the marriages that are coming into light of the authorities and represents only a minor fraction of the problem. There is a need for data on the marriages being held in silence for eradication of child marriage and better protection of young girls.

Why child marriages were high during COVID-19

The major factors attributing to increased risk of child marriages are discontinued education, economic shocks, disruptions to programmes and services, adolescent pregnancy and death of a caretaker. In addition to these factors, gender and social norms, the amount and direction of marriage payments, ongoing conflicts, forced migration and displacement and, availability of social protection and poverty alleviation programmes are the other influences that alleviates the number of child brides in upcoming years (UNICEF, 2021).

1.3 billion Children and youth were affected by closure of educational institutions due (UNESCO, 2020), especially girls are made to discontinue their studies and are less likely to be re-enrolled when school reopen which was noticed during Ebola outbreak as an evidence (Affoum and Recavarren, 2020; Plan international, 2020) and likely to occur during covid-19. According to a policy brief by Right to Education Forum, the estimated number of secondary school girls to drop out of school in India is 10 million (Rana 2021). Absence of digital infrastructure, gendered digital divide, domestic work and economic difficulties of the family prevents girls from accessing education. As an evidence, a study by Malala Fund reports that although the presence of smartphones at home, only 30 per cent of children had access, with 37 per cent of boys and 26 per cent of girls had access (Ghatak, Yareseeme, and Jha 2020). Girls with little or no education are up to six times more likely to marry as children when compared to girls with secondary schooling (ICRW 2006). Thus education is an important factor that dictates the age of marriage.

Girls spending more time at home makes them more vulnerable to domestic violence, sexual violence (UNFPA and UNICEF 2020a) and could increase their exposure to sexual activity and unwanted pregnancy (UNICEF 2021c). Thus, parents consider child marriage as a tool of protection for girls against violence and promiscuity (Nirantar Trust 2015). Other constraints due to pandemic restriction and social distancing makes it difficult for girls and women to access health care and modern contraception which results in unintended pregnancy

and subsequent child marriage (UNFPA, 2020). Poverty, in the worst-case situation, may cause girls to resort to transactional sex as a risk-coping method, increasing their vulnerability to sexual exploitation, unexpected pregnancy, and arranged marriage (Molotsky, 2015).

Drop in economic activity during Covid-19 lockdown led to increased poverty in turn limiting the ability of parents or caretakers to provide for their children (Kostelny, 2016). Many households respond to economic insecurity either by reducing the expenditure like education costs or by reducing the family size like giving of a woman in marriage in return for consideration in money or in kind (Dewi and Dartanto, 2019). For many families, child marriage is a survival tactic for short-term financial security. It can be used to create rapid revenue or as a cost-cutting measure. Alternatively, the effects of poverty on child marriage may vary in communities where the girl's family are expected to pay dowry to the groom. One of the effect is reductions in child marriage since girls' families cannot afford dowries (Corno et al., 2017), on the other hand increases the child marriage cases because the dowries are lower for young girls (Plan international, 2014). Lower dowry is offered and accepted in the presumption that young girls are easier to train and are less likely to resist (Nirantar Trust 2015). Another reflection is that younger girls can be married off to boys with less education (John 2021). Furthermore, the constraints imposed on the number of guests invited to wedding festivities were a pandemic-related incentive to marry. The restrictions were beneficial as a cost-cutting strategy for low-income households (Jejeebhoy 2021).

As household income declines, some teenagers living in particularly severe circumstances may consider child marriage to be the best alternative open to them. Girls and women may encounter hurdles to participating with the formal court system during lockdown, which can be utilised as a last-ditch effort to prevent an unlawful marriage. At the same time, the epidemic may make it difficult to enforce the legal marriage age. The loss of a parent might also increase the probability of a female orphan being married off, as family members may find it difficult to sustain her. Because COVID-19 mortality is more prevalent in the elderly — those who are grandparents rather than parents (UNICEF, 2021b). Over 4 lakh people died in India as a result of Covid-19, and anecdotal evidence shows that orphaned girls are married off early, particularly in places such as Bihar, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra (BBC 2020). In other situations, parents' anxiety of who would care for their kid if they succumbed to Covid-19 drove many youngsters into underage marriage (Pathak and Frayer 2020). During the pandemic, minor girls are being groomed for marriage by older men using the social media platform (Save the children, 2021).

Results

The assessment of the sample in the Karnataka showed that 77 per cent of the girls got married at the age of 14 to 16, 21 per cent at the age of 11 to 13 years and 2 per cent were less than 10 years of age. Only for 23 per cent of the girls, their husband's age was above 21 years and the remaining 55 per cent of husband's age was between 18 to 21, 17 per cent at 18 years of age and 5 per cent were at 16 or below 16 years of age.

The major three factors for child marriage during COVID-19 in the study was economic compulsion (37 per cent), discontinuing education (28 per cent) and, families' obligation and tradition (28 per cent). Only 2 per cent of marriages occurred because of eloping. 99 per cent of the final decision on marriage was made by parents in the family. Majority of the families were working as daily wagers and the household income is between Rs 5,000 to 10,000. And the family size with three or more than three resorted to child marriage to overcome their economic insecurity. The husband's source of income was also from daily wage leading continuous vicious circle of poverty and resorting to child marriage ultimately.

Lockdown restrictions has increased the number of marriages taking place in secrecy i.e. 83 per cent at either girls or boys place of living. This makes it difficult to intervene the marriages by authorities and gets unnoticed. And 90 per cent of the child marriages are not registered, in contrast only 1 per cent has been registered and 9 per cent of the girls are unaware of the registration. 92 per cent of the girls' household responsibilities have been increased after marriage, 3 per cent were pressurized to work and 1 per cent felt that their self-image improved among peers. More than half of the girls felt that they have to bear the responsibilities at a very young age and 27 per cent felt they are deprived of teenage life. Majority of the girls didn't possess any skills like stitching, dairy to be self-reliant but were interested to learn. Interventions should aim at providing more of skill based opportunities. 84 per cent of girls would have chosen to work over getting married at a young age.

During the study period, 19 per cent of the girls were pregnant or have been pregnant. Out of the 19 per cent, 10 per cent were pregnant at the age of 16, 8 and 1 per cent at 15 and 14 years, respectively. However 13 per cent of their spouse were of the age 18-21 and 6 per cent were 17 years old. Almost one-third of the girls experienced pressure of early pregnancy and four-fifth of them had miscarriages and/or abortions. Birth weight of the youngest child was less than 2.5kg and haven't received specific vaccine. 98 per cent of the girls have received TT immunisation during pregnancy for the youngest child. And more than 90 per cent of the girls didn't use any contraceptive measures. Although the girls gained some psychological benefits after marriage like status, no longer poor, like to be with my spouse, new family and friends, psychological problems like wanting to stay alone, loss of appetite, suicidal feeling was also expressed. From our study 91 per cent needs general counselling and remaining required clinical counselling.

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