



EARLY MARRIAGE OF GIRLS AS A BARRIER TO THEIR EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issue of early marriage in India. Their harmful consequence shows how it constitutes a barrier to education and enjoyment of girl's human rights and how it further threatens the development of countries. The findings suggest that early marriage is due to various factors including, the search for economic survival, protection of young girls, peer group and family pressure, controlling female behaviour and sexuality, wars and civil conflicts and socio-cultural and religious values. It is a violation of girl's human rights as it deprives her from freedom, opportunity for personal development, and other rights. It also a developmental challenge for population pressure, health care costs and lost opportunities of human development. It is barrier to girl's education as young girls drop out from school to get married which impacts negatively on the community as whole and on the wellbeing of future generation. This practice stands in direct conflict with the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); such as the promotion of basic education, fight against poverty, the prevention of HIV/AIDS and reduction maternal mortality rate. To deal with the problem a number of strategies have been suggested mainly providing economic opportunities to young girls, promoting education of girls and using mass media to increase the awareness of the whole community about the consequences of early marriage on girls themselves, their family and on the community as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, marriage is regarded as a moment of celebration and a milestone in adult life. Sadly, the practice of early marriage gives no such cause for celebration. All too often, the imposition of a marriage partner upon a child means that a girl or boy's childhood is cut short and their fundamental rights are compromised (UNICEF, 2001 and Lefebvre, Quiroga and Murphy 2004). Young girls are robbed of their youth and required to take on roles for which they are not psychologically or physically prepared. Many have no choice about the timing of marriage or their partner. Some are coerced into marriage, while others are too young to make an informed decision. Premature marriage deprives them of the opportunity for personal development as well as their rights to full reproductive health and wellbeing, education, and participation in civic life. Early marriage contributes to a series of negative consequences both for young girls and the society in which they live. In this paper more emphasis is given to girls as this is an issue that impacts upon girls in far larger numbers and with more intensity. Besides having a negative impact on girls themselves, the practice of early marriage also has negative consequences on their children, families, and society as a whole. UNICEF (2000) argues that it is not only girls that pay for early marriage but also the society as a whole. Population pressure, health care costs and lost opportunities of human development are just a few of the growing burdens that society shoulders because of teenage pregnancies. Early marriage also undermines

international efforts to fight against poverty in developing countries.

This paper will test the following hypothesizes: **Firstly**, it argues that "a number of factors such as poverty, social cultural and religious norms, civil conflict, value of virginity and fears about marital sexual activity are the major factors that contribute to early marriage of girls in India". **Secondly**, it asserts that "early marriage is a violation of girl's human rights as it deprives her from freedom, opportunity for personal development, and other rights including health and wellbeing, education, and participation in civic life." **Lastly**, it argues that "early marriage is a developmental challenge for the growing burdens such as population pressure, health care costs and lost opportunities of human development that society shoulder."

To test the above hypothesis and to answer the questions raised in the beginning of this introduction, this paper first tries to situate the early marriage in the context of India, the reasons motivating early marriage and its effects on married young girls, their families and on the society as a whole. The last part is the conclusion that summarizes the evidence and arguments developed throughout the research paper and provide some actions to be taken to deal with this challenging phenomenon.

BRIEF OVERVIEW ON EARLY MARRIAGE IN INDIA

What is the Early Marriage?

The term "early marriage" is used to refer to both formal marriages and informal unions in which a girl lives with a partner as if married before age of 18 (UNICEF 2005; Forum on Marriage and the

rights of women and girls 2001). For UNIFPA (2006) Early marriage, also known as Child marriage, is defined as “any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing.” Child marriage involves either one or both spouses being children and may take place with or without formal registration, and under civil, religious or customary laws. Most early marriages are arranged and based on the consent of parents and often fail to ensure the best interests of the girl child.

Early Marriage Problems

Early marriage which is also referred to as child marriage is common all over the globe and has inflicted dangerous and devastating effects on young children who are compelled to tie the knot in most cases. Child marriage is also indicative of the levels of development of a region or country.

Causes of Early Marriage;

Early marriage can arise due to a number of reasons such as these:

- To raise the economic and social status.
- Religious hurdles and barriers.
- Gender bias promotes early marriage of girls .
- Lack of education.
- Myths and misconceptions about early marriage.
- Pressures from older members of the family and community.
- The notion that early pregnancy leads to larger families and hence providing for heirs to the throne.
- Some communities regard their girl children as a burden and think of getting rid of them by marrying them off early in a patriarchal society.

Harmful effects of early marriage

Early marriage can cause severe problems like the following:-

- Psychological and emotional stress like forced sexual relations, denial of freedom and personal development as household chores now become a priority.
- Denial of personal development and education.
- Maturity levels become an issue as the little girl is now expected to play the role of a mother.
- Girl children undergo severe health problems like pregnancy and childbirth.
- Girl brides are also involved in early childhood care.

- Threat to contracting sexually transmitted diseases increases when girl children are exposed to such an environment.
- As girl children are still vulnerable and submissive, they can be subject to the atrocities of domestic violence and abandonment.
- Mental and emotional stress in girl brides is high because they are not old enough to cope with maternal, marital or in law issues.

Though the respective Governments and society is doing much to abolish early or child marriage through campaigns, laws, policies and individual support of people, it is still a far reaching dream for young girls who are still repeatedly forced into such liaisons.

Early marriages have stretched far and wide through time and countries and finally reached America as well where children in their mid-teens are taking independent steps of tying the knot with their partners. Most early marriages are considered to be forced which is true but children entering into an early marriage out of choice should also be warned of various personal and health issues that can complicate their lives forever.

Child Marriage in India

The practice of child marriage in rural India is deeply rooted in cultural values and grounded in social structures. And despite laws that prohibit child marriage, the practice is still extremely prevalent in many regions. Though the statistics are contentious, it is estimated that in some parts of India, like the state of Rajasthan, nearly 80 percent of the marriages are among girls under the age of fifteen” (Gupta, 2005, p. 2). In India overall, roughly 47.6 percent of girls are married by the age of eighteen (The implications of early marriage, 2004).

What is most urgent about child marriages in India, however, is the relationship between child marriage and the increasingly severe Indian HIV epidemic. The rates of HIV in India are a topic of great debate between the Indian government and both Indian and International NGOs. Yet, there is a consensus that HIV, once an urban phenomenon in India that was primarily transmitted within high-risk populations is now gaining momentum in rural areas (“Fears over India,” 2005). These trends are alarming and suggest that the cultural contexts in which these HIV rates are climbing need to be addressed. Additionally, recent research has found links between HIV and early marriage in communities across the globe. “The majority of sexually active girls age 15-19 in developing countries are married, and married adolescent girls

tend to have higher rates of HIV infection than their sexually active, unmarried peers” (The implications of early marriage, 2004, p. 1; Clark, Bruce, & Dude, 2006, p. 79).

Reasons for Early Marriage in India

According to Jaya Sagade, who has done extensive research on child marriages in India, marriages in the Vedic period were performed when the couples reached a mature age. The girl's consent was always sought. She even had the freedom to choose her life partner. This practice, says Jaya Sagade, continued until the sixth and seventh centuries. But there appears to have been a reversal thereafter. The patriarchal social structure that emerged seems to have given its sanction to the practice of child marriage, if one goes by the fact that ancient scriptures and customs suggest early marriage for the girl - preferably before puberty and certainly immediately after her first menstruation. According to some sociologists, the ancient erotic text the *Kama Sutra* talks indirectly of this practice when it warns that a girl who has "fully arrived at puberty" should be avoided as a wife.

Some people also trace the practice back to foreign invasions that began more than 1,000 years ago. The invaders were said to have carried away young girls as war booty, forcing local communities to marry off their daughters very young. To protect the women from sexual exploitation and to preserve their chastity, pre-puberty marriages began to be considered the best option. Over time, this became a custom, the violation of which was met with social disapproval and disgrace. It was even considered a sin to keep a girl in her parental home after she had attained puberty.

Among the other reasons cited for the continuance of the practice were: tradition, family and societal pressure, feudal set-up, and poverty. Based on the view that 'virginity' is essential in a bride, girls are married off at a very young age, beginning five years. As a result, these girls are traumatised by sex and are forced to bear children much before their bodies are fully mature. Many parents say they are scared to keep their daughters unmarried after puberty as they have a big responsibility of protecting them. Most parents cite poverty as the reason. They find it so difficult to feed everyone in the family that they prefer to "send off" the daughter as early as possible to some other family. As for the boy's family, it gets an "unpaid servant" to do the household chores, often along with dowry.

It is also the observation of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) that poor families may regard a young girl as an economic burden and her marriage as a necessary survival strategy for her

family. UNICEF is of the opinion that there may be several reasons why parents get their daughters married off early. They may think that early marriage offers protection from the dangers of sexual assault or more generally, offers the care of a male guardian. Early marriage may also be seen as a strategy to avoid girls becoming pregnant outside marriage. But there is no doubt that these notions get an impetus in an environment that basically goes against the girl child and women. There is no doubt that the affluent and the well off do not indulge in this practice, as the system is favourable to them in every sense.

Individual Rights Denied by Child Marriage

The Convention on the Rights of the Child are designed to guarantee certain individual rights—which are abused by early marriage. Rights undermined or lost by children forced to marry early are:

- The right to an education.
- The right to be protected from physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, including sexual abuse, rape and sexual exploitation.
- The right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health.
- The right to rest and leisure, and to participate freely in cultural life.
- The right to not be separated from parents against the child's will.
- The right to protection against all forms of exploitation affecting any aspect of the child's welfare.
- The right to eventual employment.

EFFECT OF EARLY MARRIAGE ON GIRL'S EDUCATION

The school is the most important institution outside the family involved in socializing young people into all dimensions of adult roles and responsibilities. More years of schooling have been associated with many positive outcomes, including later ages of marriage, lower fertility, and healthier and better educated children, economic development. However, early marriage inevitably denies children of school age their right to the education they need for their personal development their preparation for adulthood, and their effective contribution to the future wellbeing of their family and society. Indeed, married girls who would like to continue schooling may be both practically and legally excluded from doing so. The essence of the rights to education and to health is that they facilitate and ensure the effective enjoyment of other human rights.

For a number of poorer families, the potential rewards of educating daughters are too far off and therefore their education is not recognized as an investment. Families perceive that a girl's education will only benefit her husband's household, and not her parents. Additionally, some parents believe that girls do not need an education for their roles as wives and mothers, that education undermines cultural practices, and it teaches the girl to reject tradition. The following citation illustrate well the case: "At the age of about 14 years, my father sent me to my uncle so that he could let his wife train me for marriage. He believe that if continued to go to school, I would be spoilt girl" and no man would agree to marry me. Being spoilt girl meant that I would be too wise to marry back in his village where he could get my dowry. (Womankind 1999 cited by the Forum on marriage and the rights of Women and girls, 2000:p.18).

However, there is a saying that when you educate a woman you educate a nation. Education, even at a basic level, is not only about livelihood and technical skills but more importantly provides social 'connectedness' or aptitude which enables one to access key resources to alleviate poverty. By interacting with others, individuals acquire the social skills and personal capacities needed to access resources and opportunities, and to form social networks for support and assistance when required in the future. Individuals can also develop their self-esteem and confidence to voice their opinions and to take control over their own actions, lives and bodies. Other positive benefits of education are linked to improved reproductive health and child survival and welfare, (Naana Otoo-Oyortey and Sonita Pobi 2003).

Educated women are more likely to have a say in decision-making regarding the size of their families and the spacing of their children. They are also likely to be more informed and knowledgeable about contraception and the healthcare needs of their children. Adolescent girls who marry outside their communities tend to lose the close friendships they had formed in their parental homes, and often become quiet and subdued. This means that even where girls have developed social networks they are unable to access them from their marital community.

While marriage does not have to mean that a girl's or boy's education finishes, the attitudes of parents, schools and spouses in many societies mean that it often does. Husbands of young wives are often older men, who expect their wives to follow tradition, stay home and undertake household and childcare duties. A girl may be unable to go against her husband's wishes and the husband's family may

refuse to invest their scarce resources in the wife's continued schooling. Some schools often have a policy of refusing to allow married or pregnant girls or girls with babies to return. They may believe that it will set a bad example to other pupils or that other parents will be angry to see the school go against the traditional beliefs. Even if they do permit girls to return, the school environment - rules, timetables and physical conditions - can make it too difficult for a girl to attend school and perform her duties as wife and mother at the same time. Bullying and abuse by teachers, pupils and other parents can further reduce girls' self-confidence and sense of security, forcing them to give up on schooling. When girls drop out of school to get married, there is a knock-on effect for the community as a whole, and for future generations. Evidence suggests that children of young, uneducated mothers are less likely to have a good start to their education, do well in class or continue beyond the minimum schooling. Their daughters especially are likely to drop out, marry young and begin the cycle again (Ingrid Lewis 2009)

EARLY MARRIAGE AS DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGE

A 2005 UNICEF report on early marriage attributed the dangers of early pregnancy to the fact that women's bodies are still developing until age 20. In early pregnancy, the mother's body competes with the child's for needed nutrients, ultimately depriving both. Further, when a girl gives birth before her body has fully developed, she often has difficulty passing the child, increasing the likelihood of miscarriage or other maternal complications, such as haemorrhaging or obstetric fistula (a debilitating condition where a mother's digestive organs are damaged during child birth). Maternity-related deaths represent the largest cause of death for women of childbearing age, accounting for 42 per cent of all deaths of women between the ages of 15 and 49.

Early marriage stands in direct conflict with the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), (Mathur 2003). It threatens the achievement of the first six goals respectively, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases, (UN 2007). When the relationship between age at marriage and development is examined, it becomes clear that later marriage is a precondition for the attainment of desired development related goals. These can include completion of school,

acquisition of training for employment, and attainment of the skills and information related to the roles of citizen, family member, and consumer that are part of a successful adulthood, (Mathur 2003 and UNICEF 2003). In many countries child marriage is linked with poverty. This is because it affects particularly the poorest in the population, and helps to reinforce cycles of poverty. Early marriage is associated with high fertility. However, one reason for a poverty trap is a demographic trap, when impoverished families choose to have lots of children. According to Sachs (2005), high fertility rates in one generation, therefore, tend to lead to impoverished of the children and high fertility in the following generation as well.

Women are at the hearth of many societies. Regardless of whether they are working or not, mothers are very influential people in children's lives. According to DFID (2005), educating girls is one of the most important investments that a country can make in its own future. Education has a profound effect on girls and women's ability to claim other rights and achieve status in society, such as economic independence and political representation. Having an education can make an enormous difference to woman's chances of finding well paid, raising a health family and preventing the spread of diseases such as HIV and AIDS. UNICEF (1994) argues that it is not only the girls that pay for early marriage but that society also pays. Population pressure, health care costs and lost opportunities of human development are just a few of the growing burdens that society shoulder because of early marriage. Girls' education is one of the means to address poverty and developmental problems. With education girls are given the chance to choose their own futures and not one chosen by their parents and guardians. Malhotra and Mather (1997) argue that there is a close link between delayed marriage and adult earnings. Women's economic future and their ability to participation in and contribute to the global economy are primarily dependent on a rise in educational attainment, but this is impossible when the girl married early. Women who marry at early age are likely to find the sole focus of their lives, at the expense of development in other areas such as formal education, and training for employment, work experience and personal growth. Early marriage can, therefore, be a significant barrier for communities seeking to raise education levels and break the cycle of poverty.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that child marriage is an accepted cultural practice in many countries especially in developing countries. More emphasis

has been given to girls as the experience for boys is, less likely to be exploitative or physically harmful as it is for girls. The imposition of a marriage partner on children or adolescents who are in no way ready for married life, and whose marriage will deprive them of freedom, opportunity for personal development, and other rights including health and well-being, education, and participation in civic life, nullifies the meaning of the Convention on the Rights of the Child's core protections for those concerned.

Numerous severe consequences result from the practice of early marriage. Early marriage is intrinsically linked to low levels of education, high levels of violence and abuse, social isolation, severe health risks and harmful power dynamics and results in increased gender inequality and vulnerability to poverty for girls, young women, families and the society as a whole. This practice also threatens the international development effort to fight against poverty and related challenges in developing countries. To trickle this challenging phenomenon, a joint effort to formulate and implement policies and strategies is needed. Actions to fulfils or restore the rights of those already married should go hand in hand with preventive actions to insure that all of the interventions are available to married, as well as to unmarried girls.

Providing economic opportunities to young girls:

Poverty is one of the major factors underpinning early marriage. Efforts to improve the access of young married and non married girls to economic resources should focus on expanding employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. Micro-credit programs provide women and girls with the basic economic opportunities they often lack and a social support network that promotes changes in attitudes and behaviour. It serves as a means of granting them higher status and more control over their lives – including their options in marriage (Kabeer 2005 and Umashankar 2006).

Promoting education of Girls:

Educating girls seems to be the ideal solution since, if sufficiently prolonged; it helps to delay age of marriage, and confers other benefits as well. However, sending children to school costs money and where money is scarce, it is unlikely to be spent on girls. Even Churches, Media, NGOs, Donors etc, tackling marriage of young girls, policy makers, academics, and researchers, neighbours, parents, teenagers themselves, schools where education is highly subsidized or even free, poor parents have to pay for some of the costs of school attendance for their children, such as various fees,

books, and school uniforms. In this case, governments, NGOs should provide support needed for girls' education such as free books, uniforms, scholarship and so on. Using mass media to increase the awareness of the whole community about the consequences of early marriage on girls themselves, their family and on the community as a whole. Once communities are sensitized, the parents sent their girls to school and support them to stay on. This leads to the empowerment of girls into skills for self-confidence, assertiveness, speaking out, decision-making and negotiation. Gaining access to communities deeply rooted in the practice of early marriage is one of the biggest obstacles for programs to tackle. Media campaigns using radio and other traditional communication methods must be used to reach communities, especially those in rural areas. All these measures will help to ensure the domestic applicability of the national, as well as international legal instruments already ratified about girl's human rights.

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