



Socio-Economic Problems and Prevention of Child Marriage in Murshidabad: An Overview

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Abstract:

*Child marriage remains a global issue, predominantly affecting girls in low- and middle-income countries. This practice is not only a violation of human rights but also a significant impediment to socio-economic development. This article examines the socio-economic problems associated with child marriage, including poverty, lack of education, and gender inequality, and proposes strategies for its prevention. Understanding the root causes and consequences of child marriage is crucial to developing effective interventions and policies. The study adopts a **mixed-methods approach**, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Approximately 200 respondents were surveyed, with a subset of 30–40 participants selected for in-depth interviews. Structured questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data on socio-economic conditions, education levels, income, and experiences related to child marriage. The eradication of child marriage in Murshidabad requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses its socio-economic roots and challenges entrenched cultural norms. By prioritizing education, empowering women and families economically, and leveraging community engagement, the district can create an environment where every girl has the opportunity to thrive.*

Keywords: Child Marriage, Socio-Economic, Empowering Women, Community, Cultural.

Introduction:

Child marriage, defined as a formal or informal union before the age of 18, affects millions of children worldwide. It disproportionately impacts girls, exposing them to early pregnancies, domestic violence, and limited opportunities for education and economic participation. (Anju, 2010) The persistence of this practice is often driven by socio-economic factors, cultural norms, and gender biases.

Regardless of one's socioeconomic class, religious affiliation, or geographic location in India, the age-old practice of child marriage persists. Despite the fact that the Census, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), and the District Level Household and Facility Survey (DLHS) all employ different methods to gather data on child marriage, the alarmingly high frequency of child marriages remains a reality. Marriage at a young age has far-reaching societal and economic consequences that affect health, empowerment, and education throughout generations. (Bhagat, 2016) As a problem in and of itself, it exacerbates gender inequality.² Due to early marriage and the added burdens of family obligations, many children do not complete their secondary school. Not only are they robbed of their freedom to choose, but they are also burdened with family responsibilities that exceed their age and ability, which limits their opportunities to

improve their skills. (Onagoruwa. and Wodon, 2017). Lack of alternatives, constructive chances, makes females susceptible to early marriages.

Premature birth, low birth weight kids, high rates of maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity, as well as increased risk of gender-based violence, sexual abuse, and trafficking are all consequences of child marriage. Worldwide, teenage females (those aged 15–19) die at an alarming rate from complications during pregnancy and childbirth.⁴ According to the International Centre for Research on Women (2011), "if and when young women suffer from illness or die as a result of pregnancy and childbirth, this is rarely attributed to young age." This adds another layer of complexity to the current situation.

With the exception of cash transfer programs like Ladli and Balika Sammriddhi (Yojana, UNICEF 2014) which aim to delay child marriage by keeping girls in school, no directed initiative or program across the country has ever addressed the phenomenon of child marriage, despite legislative commitments to the contrary. Efforts like the Kishori Shakti Yojana, SABLA, and the newly announced 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' aim to bring attention to the problem and encourage people to take precautions.

Significance of the Study:

By analyzing the socio-economic conditions of Murshidabad, the study identifies factors contributing to child marriage, such as poverty, lack of education, cultural norms, gender inequality, and limited access to resources. Understanding these root causes can help design targeted interventions. Child marriage has far-reaching consequences, including perpetuation of poverty, health risks for young brides and their children, and restricted educational and employment opportunities for girls. Documenting these impacts emphasizes the urgency of addressing this issue. While child marriage is a national issue, regional studies like this offer localized insights, filling the gap in understanding how cultural, economic, and social dynamics vary across regions. This makes interventions more effective and context-sensitive.

Objectives: This paper explores the socio-economic implications of child marriage and outlines strategies to prevent it through education, legal frameworks, community engagement, and economic empowerment.

Method: The study adopts a **mixed-methods approach**, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Approximately 200 respondents were surveyed, with a subset of 30–40 participants selected for in-depth interviews. Structured questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data on socio-economic conditions, education levels, income, and experiences related to child marriage

Socio-Economic Problems Associated with Child Marriage:

Educational Disruption: Early marriage often truncates a child's education, particularly for girls. Families may prioritize marriage over schooling due to economic constraints or societal expectations, perpetuating cycles of illiteracy and limiting future employment opportunities.

Economic Dependency: Child brides are often economically dependent on their spouses, which limits their autonomy and decision-making capabilities. This dependency contributes to long-term poverty and reduces the family's overall economic potential.

Health Risks: There are a number of serious health issues that child brides encounter, such as increased maternal death rates, difficulties throughout pregnancies, and a lack of access to reproductive healthcare. These health problems might make people even more vulnerable financially.

Intergenerational Poverty: The socio-economic disadvantages faced by child brides are often passed to the next generation. Children born to young mothers are more likely to face malnutrition, poor health, and limited educational opportunities.

Gender Inequality: Child marriage reinforces patriarchal structures that undermine gender equality. Girls are often viewed as economic burdens or tools for social alliances rather than individuals with rights and aspirations.

Child Marriage Status in Murshidabad and West Bengal

		NFHS-4			NFHS-5			Change	
District	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Murshidabad	58.2	64.2	40.0	57.9	61.9	45.5	-0.3	-2.3	5.5
West Bengal	44.5	50.9	30.0	42.5	49.1	27.6	-2.0	-1.8	-2.4

Source: National Family Health Survey

This table presents data from the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS-4 and NFHS-5) on child marriage prevalence in Murshidabad and West Bengal, highlighting total, rural, and urban figures and the changes observed between the two survey periods. The total child marriage prevalence in Murshidabad decreased slightly from 58.2% (NFHS-4) to 57.9% (NFHS-5), reflecting a **marginal decline of 0.3 percentage points**. This minimal reduction suggests slow progress in addressing child marriage in the district, particularly in rural areas. Rural child marriage rates dropped from 64.2% to 61.9%, a decrease of **2.3 percentage points**. While this reduction is noteworthy, rural areas remain hotspots for child marriage, likely due to entrenched socio-economic and cultural factors. Urban child marriage rates increased from 40.0% to 45.5%, an **alarming rise of 5.5 percentage points**. This increase may be attributed to urban poverty, migration-related vulnerabilities, or inadequate urban-specific interventions.

Statewide, the total prevalence of child marriage fell from 44.5% to 42.5%, a decline of **2.0 percentage points**. The decline is more significant than in Murshidabad, indicating better statewide efforts in combating child marriage. Rural prevalence reduced from 50.9% to 49.1%, a modest decline of **1.8 percentage points**. Similar to Murshidabad, rural areas in West Bengal continue to record higher child marriage rates compared to urban areas. Urban prevalence dropped from 30.0% to 27.6%, a decline of **2.4 percentage points**. This decrease indicates the effectiveness of targeted interventions in urban settings across the state.

Murshidabad has a much higher prevalence of child marriage (57.9%) compared to the state average (42.5%). Urban child marriage rates in Murshidabad (45.5%) are disproportionately higher than the state urban average (27.6%), suggesting gaps in urban interventions in the district. Both Murshidabad and West Bengal show progress in reducing rural child marriage rates. However, rural areas remain the most affected, requiring continued and intensified efforts. The rise in urban child marriage rates in Murshidabad is concerning, in contrast to the decline in urban West Bengal. This trend may point to specific vulnerabilities, such as urban poverty, migration, or lack of effective monitoring and legal enforcement.

Socio-economic problems associated with the Child Marriage Practice(N=200)

Socio-Economic Problem	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poverty (Economic Insecurity)	140	70

Lack of Education (School Dropout)	120	60
Gender Discrimination (Patriarchy)	110	55
Cultural and Religious Norms	100	50
Early Pregnancy and Health Risks	90	45
Domestic Violence and Abuse	80	40
Economic Dependency	85	42.5
Lack of Access to Healthcare	75	37.5
Intergenerational Poverty	130	65
Social Pressure (Family Reputation)	95	47.5

Poverty (70%) is the most frequently cited issue, indicating that economic insecurity is a major driver of child marriage. Lack of Education (60%) highlights how child marriage disrupts educational opportunities, particularly for girls. Gender Discrimination (55%) remains a critical factor, perpetuating patriarchal structures and limiting girls' autonomy. Cultural Norms (50%) show the influence of traditional practices that normalize early marriage. Health Risks (45%), including complications from early pregnancies, are common among child brides.

Strategies for the Prevention of Child Marriage

Promoting Education: Access to quality education is one of the most effective tools for preventing child marriage. Educated girls are more likely to delay marriage and have greater economic opportunities. Policies should focus on subsidizing education, reducing dropout rates, and promoting gender-sensitive curricula.

Economic Empowerment of Families: Poverty is a major driver of child marriage. Providing economic support to families through conditional cash transfers, microfinance programs, and skill development initiatives can reduce financial pressures that lead to early marriages.

Strengthening Legal Frameworks: Enforcing laws that prohibit child marriage is essential. Governments should ensure that legal frameworks are clear, accessible, and implemented effectively, with strict penalties for violations.

Community Engagement: Changing societal norms requires engaging communities in dialogue about the harms of child marriage. Working with local leaders, religious figures, and women's groups can foster a cultural shift towards valuing girls' education and autonomy.

Comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health Education: Teaching young people about sexual and reproductive health can empower them to make informed decisions and challenge harmful practices.

Global and Regional Collaboration: International organizations, governments, and NGOs must work together to share best practices, allocate resources, and monitor progress in combating child marriage.

Initiatives and Regional Success Stories

Kanyashree Prakalpa Scheme: West Bengal's flagship program, *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, has been instrumental in reducing child marriage rates in Murshidabad. By providing financial incentives to girls who remain unmarried until 18 and pursue education, the scheme has seen significant success in raising awareness and changing behaviors.

Village Child Protection Committees: In several villages, community-driven initiatives have been established to monitor and prevent child marriages. These committees work closely with local government bodies and NGOs to ensure that children, especially girls, are safeguarded.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs): Women's self-help groups in Murshidabad have empowered mothers to prioritize their daughters' education and resist societal pressures for early marriages.

Conclusion:

The eradication of child marriage in Murshidabad requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses its socio-economic roots and challenges entrenched cultural norms. By prioritizing education, empowering women and families economically, and leveraging community engagement, the district can create an environment where every girl has the opportunity to thrive. Ending child marriage in Murshidabad is not just a legal or ethical obligation; it is a crucial step towards sustainable development and gender equality. With concerted efforts from government, NGOs, and local communities, the vision of a child marriage-free Murshidabad can become a reality.

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Citation: Mallick. P. & Kumar. Dr. A., (2024) "Socio-Economic Problems and Prevention of Child Marriage in Murshidabad: An Overview", *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-2, Issue-10, November-2024.