



## Intersecting Poverty, Education, and Gender: Socio-Economic Factors Behind Child Marriage in Murshidabad

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### Abstract:

*Child marriage remains one of the most persistent social issues in India, with profound implications for gender equality, education, and socio-economic development. The district of Murshidabad in West Bengal represents a critical site for understanding this phenomenon due to its deeply rooted cultural traditions, economic deprivation, and gender inequalities. This paper explores the intersecting roles of poverty, education, and gender in perpetuating child marriage in Murshidabad district. Using secondary data, field-based observations, and existing literature, the study analyzes how socio-economic vulnerabilities, patriarchal ideologies, and limited access to education collectively sustain early marriage practices. It also highlights the failures of policy interventions and suggests community-based and educational strategies to prevent child marriage and empower girls toward sustainable development and gender justice.*

**Keywords:** *Child Marriage, Poverty, Gender Inequality, Education, Murshidabad, Socio-Economic Determinants.*

### Introduction:

Child marriage, defined as a marital union where at least one party is below the legal age of 18 years, continues to pose a severe challenge to social progress in India. Despite several laws and policy measures such as *The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006*, and awareness campaigns like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, the prevalence of child marriage remains disproportionately high in several districts of West Bengal, particularly Murshidabad. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21), West Bengal ranks among the top states in India with significant child marriage rates, with Murshidabad showing figures as high as 39% among women aged 20–24 who were married before 18 years.

The socio-economic fabric of Murshidabad is characterized by high levels of poverty, illiteracy, low female workforce participation, and entrenched patriarchal norms. This intersection of economic deprivation, educational marginalization, and gender subordination forms the structural basis for the persistence of child marriage. The current study seeks to unpack these interlinked factors, exploring how poverty, gender bias, and educational deprivation interact to normalize and perpetuate early marriages.

## Significance of the Study:

The study “*Intersecting Poverty, Education, and Gender: Socio-Economic Factors Behind Child Marriage in Murshidabad*” is significant as it explores the deep-rooted social and economic forces perpetuating child marriage in one of West Bengal’s most vulnerable districts. By examining how poverty, limited educational opportunities, and gender discrimination intersect to sustain early marriage practices, the study highlights the multidimensional nature of the problem. Its findings can guide policymakers, educators, and social workers in designing targeted interventions that combine education, economic empowerment, and gender sensitization. Moreover, it contributes to academic discourse on gender and development by revealing how structural inequalities shape personal and familial decisions in rural India. Ultimately, the study seeks to promote informed policy reforms and community-based initiatives aimed at ensuring that every girl in Murshidabad has the right to education, autonomy, and a dignified future.

**Objectives of the Study:** The main objectives of this research article are:

1. To analyze the socio-economic and cultural causes behind child marriage in Murshidabad district.
2. To examine the relationship between poverty, education, and gender in sustaining the practice of child marriage.
3. To assess the impact of child marriage on women’s social and economic empowerment.
4. To evaluate government and community-level preventive measures and their effectiveness in curbing child marriage.

**Methodology:** This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach supported by secondary data from government sources, reports by NGOs, and relevant academic studies. The data is drawn from:

- National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21)
- Census of India, 2011
- District Human Development Report (Murshidabad, 2018)
- Reports from UNICEF, CRY, and other NGOs operating in West Bengal

## Review of Literature:

Several studies (Jensen & Thornton, 2003; UNICEF, 2020) highlight that poverty acts as both a cause and a consequence of child marriage. Poor families often perceive early marriage as a strategy to reduce economic burden and secure the girl’s social future. In Murshidabad, where a significant section of the population depends on agricultural and beedi-making work, girls are viewed as economic liabilities, leading parents to prioritize marriage over education.

Education serves as the strongest deterrent to early marriage. According to Singh and Mukherjee (2019), girls who complete secondary education are six times less likely to be married before 18. However, in Murshidabad, dropout rates among adolescent girls remain alarmingly high due to poverty, distance of schools, early domestic responsibilities, and inadequate infrastructure. Lack of education not only limits awareness but also restricts economic independence, reinforcing the cycle of poverty and early marriage.

Patriarchal control over women’s sexuality and mobility reinforces the idea that early marriage ensures “protection” and “honour” of girls. Studies by Kabeer (2005) and Nanda et al. (2016) have demonstrated

how patriarchal societies perceive daughters as family burdens. In Murshidabad, conservative gender norms rooted in religious and cultural values continue to justify early marriage as a moral safeguard against premarital relationships and family dishonour.

According to a 2018 report by Child Rights and You (CRY), dowry demands increase with the girl's age and education level, leading parents to marry their daughters early to reduce costs. These socio-cultural pressures further intersect with economic distress and illiteracy, reinforcing the practice.

### **Discussion and Analysis:**

**The Poverty Trap:** Murshidabad is one of the most economically backward districts of West Bengal. According to the District Human Development Report (2018), nearly 32% of households live below the poverty line, with a majority dependent on informal sectors such as beedi rolling and small-scale agriculture. For many families, the cost of continuing a girl's education, coupled with limited employment opportunities, outweighs the perceived benefits. Early marriage, therefore, becomes an economic strategy for survival.

Poverty not only restricts educational access but also increases vulnerability to social pressures. Families facing food insecurity and debt often perceive marriage as a way to transfer financial responsibility to the husband's household. Thus, economic marginalization and social insecurity together create fertile ground for child marriage.

**Education and Awareness Deficits:** Low literacy and school dropout rates among girls are central to the perpetuation of early marriage. According to the 2011 Census, the female literacy rate in Murshidabad was 63%, below the state average. Many girls leave school after primary education due to early involvement in household chores or fear of harassment on the way to distant schools. This educational deprivation limits girls' aspirations, awareness about legal rights, and exposure to alternative life paths beyond marriage.

Inadequate educational infrastructure, lack of separate toilets, and insufficient safety measures in schools discourage families from continuing their daughters' education. Consequently, girls are deprived of a critical empowering space that could challenge traditional gender norms and delay marriage.

**Gender Inequality and Patriarchal Culture:** Patriarchal attitudes deeply influence parental decisions regarding girls' futures. In many rural communities of Murshidabad, the value of a girl is linked to her role as a wife and mother rather than as an educated or working individual. Social control over female sexuality and fear of stigma from premarital relationships further drive early marriage. Additionally, gendered expectations restrict women's participation in decision-making processes, reinforcing dependence and subordination.

Religious conservatism in some parts of Murshidabad also plays a role. The internalization of patriarchal interpretations of religious values often leads to gender-biased practices, reinforcing early marriage as a norm of social respectability.

**Health and Social Consequences:** Child marriage results in serious health, psychological, and social repercussions. Adolescent brides are more likely to experience early pregnancies, malnutrition, and maternal health complications. According to NFHS-5, teenage pregnancies are significantly higher among child brides, contributing to high maternal mortality rates in rural Murshidabad. Moreover, early marriage curtails opportunities for education and employment, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty and dependence.

**Policy Implementation Gaps:** Although several laws and schemes exist, including the *Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006)*, *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, and *Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana*, enforcement remains weak at

the grassroots level. Lack of coordination between departments, inadequate awareness among rural populations, and the absence of continuous monitoring dilute their effectiveness. While the *Kanyashree* scheme has had a positive impact in some areas, social resistance and bureaucratic delays limit its full potential in Murshidabad.

### **Preventive Measures and Recommendations:**

**Strengthening Education:** Education plays a decisive role in breaking the intergenerational cycle of child marriage and poverty (UNICEF, 2020). In Murshidabad, strengthening educational access and quality is not only a developmental necessity but also a social intervention that directly addresses the structural roots of early marriage. Increasing the accessibility of secondary schools in rural and remote areas is fundamental, as many villages still lack nearby institutions, compelling girls to discontinue their education due to distance, safety concerns, or transportation costs (Government of West Bengal, 2018). Establishing more secondary and higher secondary schools within reachable distances would significantly reduce dropout rates. Moreover, the provision of safe and reliable transportation for girls is equally vital. Fear of harassment on the way to school and lack of safe commuting options often discourage parents from allowing their daughters to continue education beyond the primary level (UNFPA, 2022).

Another crucial aspect is the creation of adequate sanitation facilities, particularly separate toilets for girls. Many studies have found that the absence of proper sanitation in schools is a major factor behind adolescent girls' absenteeism and eventual dropout (Singh & Mukherjee, 2019). Ensuring hygienic and gender-sensitive infrastructure can contribute to sustained school attendance and comfort for girl students. Alongside these infrastructural improvements, community-based mentoring and awareness programs should be introduced to link education with empowerment. When families, particularly mothers and community elders, understand the transformative value of education in shaping girls' futures, they are more likely to resist pressures for early marriage (Kabeer, 2005). Local mentors, teachers, and women educators can play a pivotal role in motivating girls to pursue their studies, emphasizing how education translates into self-reliance, respect, and better living standards (Nanda et al., 2016). Thus, educational strengthening must go beyond mere access—it must create an enabling environment where girls are seen as active agents of development, not passive recipients of charity.

**Economic Empowerment:** Economic deprivation remains one of the central forces driving child marriage in Murshidabad. For families struggling to meet basic needs, early marriage is often perceived as a pragmatic solution to reduce household burden (Jensen & Thornton, 2003). Therefore, any sustainable strategy to eliminate child marriage must prioritize the economic empowerment of women and families. Promoting self-help groups (SHGs) and vocational training programs for adolescent girls and mothers is an effective approach to building resilience against poverty (CRY, 2018). SHGs not only offer women financial independence through small savings and credit facilities but also foster collective solidarity and social awareness. Vocational training, on the other hand, can equip adolescent girls with practical skills—such as tailoring, handicrafts, digital literacy, and small-scale entrepreneurship—that enable them to earn a livelihood and delay marriage until they are socially and economically prepared.

In addition, implementing microfinance initiatives and livelihood programs targeted at economically vulnerable families can significantly reduce their dependency on early marriage as a survival strategy (UNICEF, 2020). By supporting family income generation, these interventions can mitigate the perceived economic burden of having a daughter. When parents observe that educated and skilled girls contribute economically, their attitude towards marriage age and gender roles gradually transforms. Furthermore, linking these economic initiatives with education—for instance, conditional cash transfers for school attendance or vocational scholarships—can yield even more sustainable outcomes (Singh & Mukherjee,

2019). In the long run, economic empowerment not only combats poverty but also redefines gender relations by positioning women as contributors rather than dependents. Hence, economic stability and self-reliance act as the strongest shields against the social compulsion of child marriage.

**Community Mobilization:** While structural reforms are crucial, the battle against child marriage cannot be won without transforming community mindsets. Community mobilization lies at the heart of social change in districts like Murshidabad, where traditions and collective norms exert strong influence on individual behavior (Nanda et al., 2016). Engaging religious leaders, school teachers, and local panchayat members in awareness campaigns is essential for building a social consensus against child marriage. These figures hold moral and social authority within rural communities; their endorsement of anti-child-marriage messages can shift perceptions and challenge long-standing patriarchal customs (Kabeer, 2005). Awareness initiatives must move beyond formal meetings to continuous dialogue through village gatherings, school events, and women's forums.

Creating adolescent girls' clubs and peer networks can also play a transformative role in community mobilization. Such spaces offer young girls opportunities to share experiences, learn about their rights, and build confidence to resist familial pressure for early marriage (CRY, 2018). Peer groups can further serve as local watchdogs, reporting potential cases of child marriage to authorities or NGOs. Alongside this, community campaigns should employ culturally resonant media to reach wider audiences. Folk theatre, street plays, local radio, and traditional songs can effectively communicate the emotional and social costs of child marriage in a language that rural populations understand and trust (Prakash, 2016). By incorporating these art forms, awareness messages become both educational and engaging, capable of penetrating deep-rooted social beliefs. Community mobilization, therefore, must be conceived not as a temporary intervention but as a sustained social movement that transforms collective consciousness and redefines the value of girls in society.

**Policy Strengthening:** Effective policy enforcement and institutional coordination are indispensable to the eradication of child marriage in Murshidabad. Despite the existence of robust legal frameworks such as *The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act* (2006) and empowering schemes like *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, gaps persist in implementation and monitoring (Government of West Bengal, 2018). Ensuring strict enforcement of laws against child marriage requires both administrative vigilance and grassroots collaboration. Local government officials, child protection committees, and law enforcement agencies must be sensitized and equipped to handle cases swiftly and empathetically. Moreover, punitive measures should be supplemented with rehabilitative strategies—providing education, counseling, and financial support to rescued or at-risk girls (UNFPA, 2022).

A major limitation in current efforts lies in the lack of coordination among departments dealing with education, women and child development, and health. Strengthening inter-departmental collaboration can create a holistic response system where child protection, education, and health initiatives work in synergy (UNICEF, 2020). For instance, school authorities can alert child protection officers about irregular attendance, which often precedes early marriage, while health workers can report underage pregnancies or high-risk families. Furthermore, policy monitoring must become more transparent and participatory. Periodic evaluation of schemes such as *Kanyashree Prakalpa* should involve local women's groups, teachers, and community representatives to ensure inclusivity and accountability (Singh & Mukherjee, 2019). Digital tracking systems can also help prevent corruption and ensure benefits reach the intended recipients. Importantly, policy design must adopt a rights-based approach, emphasizing girls' entitlement to education, safety, and dignity rather than treating them as passive beneficiaries (Kabeer, 2005). When laws and policies are not only enforced but internalized by communities as moral and developmental imperatives, the foundation of child marriage begins to weaken irreversibly.

## Conclusion:

Child marriage in Murshidabad is not merely a cultural practice but a manifestation of structural inequalities shaped by poverty, illiteracy, and gender subordination. The interlinking of these factors creates a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains early marriage across generations. Breaking this cycle requires a multidimensional strategy — one that integrates educational reform, gender sensitization, economic empowerment, and community participation. Only through holistic interventions that address both economic and cultural roots can Murshidabad move towards a future where every girl has the right to education, dignity, and self-determination.

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