

Child marriage as a social problem and its impacts on the girl child

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Abstract

Child Marriages exist in feudal societies where the Nagnika concept was prevalent. Parents were made to believe that if they did not get their daughters married off before puberty, they would go to hell. Indian tradition places a high premium on virginity before marriage. This applies to women and to some extent men too. In a culture where premarital chastity is valued, one of the easiest ways of achieving this is to get the young girls married in their childhood. In India 45 percent of girls are wedded below 18 year. The Niger is top country (74.5%) in the world for child marriage below 18 years of the age, followed by Chad, Mali, Bangladesh, Guinea and Central African Republic, their percentages are 71.5, 70.6, 66.62, 63.1 and 57 respectively. Majority of girls who were married below 18 year are from poor and below poverty line (BPL) families. Nearly 80 percent girls are facing the domestic violence (beaten, slapped or threatened), health problems. Most of the girls who are married before 18 year are likely to get pregnancy problems and there were death case reported. Girls younger than 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s. The age group below 18 year has high fertility. Child brides often show signs symptomatic of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress such as feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and severe depression.

Keywords: child marriage, poverty, health problems

1. Introduction

Child Marriage is one of the burning problems of Indian society. In India, despite amended laws advocating 18 as the legal minimum age at marriage for females, a substantial proportion i.e. every third adolescent girl in the age group of 15-19 year is married and every second married adolescent girl has given birth to a child. According to the Registrar General of India (RGI) Report (2001) Rajasthan has the highest (40.8) percentage of females ever married among 15-19 year old girls followed by Bihar (39.6 %), Madhya Pradesh (34.1%), Jharkhand (32.9%) and Andhra Pradesh (32.3%). Child marriage in India has been practiced for centuries, with children married off before their physical and mental maturity. The problem of child marriage in India remains rooted in a complex matrix of religious traditions, social practices, economic factors and deeply rooted prejudices. Regardless of its roots, child marriage constitutes a gross violation of human rights, leaving physical, psychological and emotional scars for life. Sexual activity starts soon after marriage, and pregnancy and childbirth at an early age can lead to maternal as well as infant mortality. Moreover, women who marry younger are more likely to experience domestic violence within the home.

2. Methodology

To study the socio-economic conditions of the child family, to identify the factors influence the child marriages and to examine the implications of the child marriage. To analyze constitutional and legal measures against child marriage and their implementation. The present study analyzed based on the primary and secondary data, covering various issues like poverty, domestic violence, poor understanding, their health problems, level of management and their living standard of the wedded girl children.

3. Review of Literature

Married girls typically have low levels of educational attainment, limited or even absent peer networks, restricted mobility and less access to mass media such as T.V., Radio and Newspapers as compared to boys or unmarried girls Haberland & Bracken, (2004).

In India, the age of marriage of girls has shown a marginal increase over the years. Nevertheless it continues to be much lower than the legal age and still a large number of girls continue to be married at very young ages Karkal & Rajan, (1989).

The problems include soaring birth rates, grinding poverty and malnutrition, high illiteracy and infant mortality, and low life expectancy, especially among rural women Burns, (1998).

High fertility rate is attributed to an early marriage i.e. child marriage. The earlier a time a woman marries the more likely she is to give birth to a larger number of children, consequently placing a high demand on her health Bhat, (2005).

On the contrary, young brides are pressurized to prove their fertility as soon as possible after the marriage and to produce children especially sons. "A young girl with minimal or no education, raised to be submissive and subservient, married to an older man, has little ability to negotiate sexual activity Khan, (1996).

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Reasons responsible for child marriage

The discriminations against women are pervasive. It begins from womb and ends with tomb. The discrimination reflects in education, employment, work place, family and socio-political sphere. The child marriage system is also a reflection of discrimination against women. There are many factors that are responsible for child marriage.

Poverty of Family

Women and female children are often denied equal access to common resources when a family is in poverty. Female members, mainly female children are victimized by poverty of the family. A poor family naturally jeopardizes female children. Every chance is used for avoiding burden of female. So poor families naturally resort to child marriage to avoid all sorts of burden of female child.

Social Insecurity

Social security is also one of the social factors responsible for child marriage system. It is general perception that a married woman is safer against offenses than an unmarried woman. People view married women differently than unmarried girls. Unmarried girls are viewed with malafied intentions. It is the malafied intentions that lead to crimes against unmarried girls/females. To be secure from offences, assaults, teasing against unmarried girls, parents are in a hasty to give away girl in marriage soon after she attains puberty or earlier.

Avoiding share in Ancestral Property

Right of female to share ancestral property is also one of the factors responsible for encouraging child marriages to some extent. If marriage of girl is done at early age she as a child would not demand for her share.

Avoiding expenditure on female education

Generally families discriminates between boys and girls (Males and Females) in investment on education, male children are treated as future assets and economic base of the family whereas female children are treated as burden on the family economic base and they are treated as someones else asset as they are to be given to someone in Marriage. Due to this discrimination in spending on children education, female children are given less or no priority

4.2 Effects

Early Pregnancy-Health complications

Child marriage naturally leads to early pregnancy resulting into many health complications. Without proper knowledge about physiological condition, she cannot cope with changes in her body during pregnancy. Elderly women are too not in a position to guide her properly. In the olden days elderly women used to monitor the situation perfectly during pregnancy, during delivery and post delivery times. But now-a-days elderly women neither have knowledge as did women in olden days nor have positive attitude to approach proper medical people. This type of situations sometimes leads to depend on local quakes in emergency.

Fall in the High Fertility Age Group

When a female is married below the age of 16 years normally tend to have more children, unwanted pregnancy. Lack of access to modern medical facilities to avoid/post phone pregnancy, women are forced to have pregnancy and carry the child.

Inability to Plan or Manage Families

Statistically, women who marry early are likely to bear more children. Among our respondents, those married under 15 averaged 5.10 children; those married between 15 and 17 had 4.70 and those over the age of 18 averaged 3.25 children.

Young mothers exercise less influence and control over their children and have less ability to make decisions about their nutrition, health care and household management.

Effect on sexual health of young girls

Young girls can face considerable physical pain associated with sexual intercourse as a result of the physiological immaturity of their sexual organs. Complications due to pregnancy at a young age frequently include obstetric fistula (perforation of the bladder or bowel, due to prolonged labour).

5. Conclusion

Therefore, from the above discussion it was concluded that in early marriage, the girl child's reproductive and sexual health is affected the most. These girls suffer from high rates of obstetric complications, intrauterine growth retardation, pregnancy induced hypertension, premature delivery, higher mortality rates, high incidence of RTIs and STI and fetal wastage (miscarriages or still births). The neonatal and infant mortality rates are also high along with incidences of premature delivery and low birth weight of the newborn child. The risks of early marriage are not just limited to the girl child alone, but also to the child that is born to her as a result of an early pregnancy. One in 15 children in India dies before their first birthday as compared to 1 in 200 children across the industrialized world. There is a tremendous pressure on young wives to bear a child. Early sexual activity also exposes adolescents to a greater risk of contracting Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS. Early marriage and pregnancy is one of the major causes of maternal mortality in India.

6. Suggestion

The outcomes from this study suggest the following strategies to address this problem:

1. Strengthen and establish community networks and partnerships involving girls clubs, teachers, elders, local government officials, women and youth groups, community and religious leaders, etc., that jointly work towards ending early marriage.
2. Strengthen the role of the judicial system particularly the police, judges and persecutors through training on enforcement of the law against early marriage.
3. Develop strong support systems to keep girls in school. Provide scholarships where necessary and encourage teachers to support girls.
4. Efforts should be made to give-up the factors motivating child marriages, all efforts should aim at change the gender biased attitudes of parents and society by imparting proper education on one hand and eradicating poverty on the other.

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