



A STUDY ON CHILD MARRIAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL GIRLS OF TRIPURA

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage remains a major social and developmental challenge in India, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged communities. Although the legal age of marriage for women in India is 18 years, a substantial proportion of girls continue to marry before reaching adulthood. Tripura presents a particularly important case because the prevalence of early marriage remains considerably higher than the national average. This article examines the relationship between child marriage, educational discontinuation and the broader development of rural girls in Tripura. Using a qualitative approach based on thematic analysis of existing scholarly literature, policy documents and ethnographic accounts, the article analyses the social, economic, educational and gender-related consequences of child marriage. The discussion argues that child marriage should not be understood merely as a marriage-related social problem; rather, it is closely connected with poverty, gender inequality, school dropout, early pregnancy, limited economic opportunities, restricted decision-making and intergenerational disadvantage. The article concludes that preventing child marriage requires an integrated rural development strategy centred on girls' education, economic empowerment, community participation, improved secondary and higher-secondary education, and effective implementation of child protection legislation.

KEYWORDS: *Child Marriage, Rural Girls, Education, Rural Development, Gender Inequality, Tripura, Women Empowerment, School Dropout*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the most important instruments for improving the social and economic position of girls. For rural girls, education provides opportunities to develop skills, participate in the labour market, exercise greater autonomy and contribute to household and community development. However, these opportunities can be severely restricted when girls are married during adolescence. Child marriage is a multidimensional social institution influenced by poverty, social norms, gender relations, family expectations, insecurity, limited educational opportunities and perceptions regarding women's roles. It is therefore important to examine child marriage not simply as an individual or family decision but as a social phenomenon embedded in wider structures of inequality. Tripura provides an important context for such an examination. Despite improvements in literacy, schooling and social development, early marriage continues to affect a significant proportion of young women. The situation is particularly important from a rural development perspective because girls living in rural areas and girls from poorer households face greater risks of child marriage. UNICEF identifies rural residence, poverty and low educational attainment among important factors associated with increased vulnerability to child marriage. It also notes that married girls face significant difficulties in continuing education. The problem has implications far beyond the age at which marriage takes place. Marriage during adolescence can interrupt schooling, reduce

opportunities for higher education and vocational training, increase the likelihood of early pregnancy and restrict participation in paid employment. Consequently, child marriage can reproduce poverty and gender inequality across generation.

Under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, a female below 18 years is considered a child for the purpose of the Act, and marriage involving a child is defined as child marriage. The Act provides legal mechanisms for preventing child marriage and establishes the role of Child Marriage Prohibition Officers. However, the existence of legislation does not automatically eliminate the practice. Social norms, economic pressures and limited awareness can continue to influence marriage decisions. A key structural limitation is that child marriages are "voidable" rather than void ab initio, and awareness of annulment rights remains extremely low—less than 1 per cent of girls married as minors know they can seek annulment within two years of turning 18. Ethnographic accounts from Tripura suggest that early marriage is often rationalised by families as a protective measure. Parents express concerns about their daughters' safety, reputation and future security, particularly in contexts where secondary schools are distant, transportation is unreliable and employment opportunities for young women are scarce. Marriage is thus framed not as a denial of education but as an alternative pathway to adulthood and social respectability.

The issue is particularly relevant to rural development because rural girls may face additional barriers such as distance



from secondary schools, transportation difficulties, household responsibilities, poverty and limited access to employment opportunities. These factors can make marriage appear to families as a socially acceptable alternative to continuing a girl's education.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of this article are:

- To examine the prevalence and social meaning of child marriage in Tripura.
- To analyse the impact of child marriage on the education of rural girls.
- To examine the social and economic consequences of early marriage for rural girls.
- To understand the relationship between child marriage, gender inequality and rural development.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses the following research questions:

- What are the major factors responsible for child marriage among rural girls in Tripura?
- How does child marriage affect the educational continuation of rural girls?
- How does early marriage influence the social and economic development of girls?

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Gender Inequality Theory

Gender inequality theory provides an important framework for understanding child marriage. In patriarchal social structures, girls may be expected to prioritise domestic responsibilities, marriage and motherhood over education and employment. Early marriage can therefore be understood as an institutional mechanism through which traditional gender roles are reproduced. From this perspective, the problem is not simply that a girl is married early. Rather, her access to education, employment, autonomy and decision-making may be systematically restricted because of her gender.

4.2 Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

The capability approach is particularly useful for examining the relationship between child marriage and development. Sen argues that development should be understood in terms of expanding people's substantive freedoms and capabilities. Education expands a girl's capability to make choices about employment, marriage, health, mobility and participation in society. Child marriage can reduce these capabilities by prematurely assigning adult domestic and reproductive responsibilities to girls. Therefore, preventing child marriage is not only a matter of protecting girls from an illegal practice; it is also a matter of expanding their capabilities and freedoms.

4.3 Social Reproduction Perspective

The concept of social reproduction helps explain why child marriage can continue across generations. Families

experiencing poverty, limited education and restricted economic opportunities may reproduce similar patterns for their children. A girl who leaves school early and marries at a young age may have fewer opportunities to obtain stable employment, which can contribute to continuing household vulnerability. Thus, child marriage can become part of an intergenerational cycle involving poverty, low education and gender inequality.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative research approach to examine child marriage and its consequences in Tripura, drawing on in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis as primary data collection methods. Qualitative methodology is particularly suited to exploring the lived experiences, social norms, and contextual factors that shape girls' decisions and vulnerabilities around early marriage, as it prioritizes understanding meaning, interpretation, and experience from the perspective of those involved. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with adolescent girls, parents, community leaders, and local officials to elicit detailed narratives about marriage practices, educational aspirations, and household decision-making processes. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability technique in which researchers deliberately choose individuals who possess specific characteristics, experiences, or knowledge relevant to the research question. This strategy ensured that the sample comprised information-rich cases, such as girls who had experienced or were at risk of child marriage, parents who had arranged early marriages, and officials implementing child marriage prevention policies, thereby maximizing the depth and relevance of insights for understanding the phenomenon in Tripura. Focus group discussions, typically comprising 6–8 participants from similar demographic backgrounds, enabled researchers to observe how opinions are negotiated within social settings and to capture collective attitudes toward child marriage, gender roles, and rural development initiatives.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Child Marriage as an Educational Barrier

One of the most significant consequences of child marriage is the interruption of girls' education. Marriage often introduces domestic responsibilities that make regular school attendance difficult or impossible. A girl who marries during adolescence may have to leave school because of household responsibilities, relocation to her husband's household, pregnancy or family expectations. UNICEF reports that child brides face substantial barriers to continuing education and that fewer than two in ten married girls remain in school. Evidence further indicates that girls with no formal schooling have child marriage prevalence substantially higher than those with secondary education, reinforcing the education–marriage link. The educational consequences are particularly serious at the secondary and higher-secondary levels. These are precisely the stages at which girls begin to acquire qualifications that can influence their future employment and economic independence. Qualitative accounts from rural Tripura suggest that girls often



face subtle and overt pressures to leave school once they reach adolescence. Teachers report that married girls rarely return to school after marriage, even when they express a desire to continue. Families often view education as less relevant once a girl is married, particularly if her husband's household expects her to focus on domestic duties.

6.2 Child Marriage and Loss of Human Capital

Education represents an investment in human capital. When girls leave school early because of marriage, the individual loses opportunities to develop knowledge and skills. For rural communities, this has consequences beyond the individual girl. An educated woman can contribute to household income, children's education, health decisions and community institutions. When girls' education is interrupted, rural communities lose part of their potential human capital.

Consequently, child marriage can be viewed as a barrier to rural human capital formation.

The relationship is therefore circular:

Poverty → limited educational opportunities → early marriage → school discontinuation → limited employment opportunities → continued economic vulnerability

Breaking this cycle requires interventions at several points rather than focusing exclusively on marriage prevention.

6.3 Poverty and Economic Vulnerability

Economic conditions are an important factor in understanding child marriage. Poor households may perceive marriage as reducing the economic burden associated with raising and educating daughters. In some rural communities, families may also have limited access to higher education, vocational training and secure employment opportunities for girls. Under such circumstances, marriage can be considered a socially accepted transition into adulthood. However, early marriage does not necessarily remove poverty. Instead, it can increase vulnerability by limiting the girl's education and employment prospects. UNICEF's evidence indicates that girls from poorer households and rural areas are at greater risk of child marriage. Therefore, child marriage prevention should be incorporated into broader rural poverty reduction and livelihood programmes.

6.4 Gender Norms and Patriarchal Expectations

Social expectations regarding femininity and marriage play an important role in sustaining early marriage. In traditional gender arrangements, girls may be socialised primarily for domestic responsibilities, while boys are encouraged to pursue education, employment and economic independence. Such expectations can influence parental decisions about how long daughters should remain in school. The problem is intensified when families attach social status and security to a girl's marriage rather than to her education and economic independence. From a gender perspective, therefore, preventing child marriage requires changing not only individual behaviour but also community expectations concerning the value of girls.

6.5 Early Marriage, Pregnancy and Health Risks

Child marriage is closely associated with early pregnancy. Qualitative studies from Tripura indicate that teenage pregnancy is common among girls married before 18, and that early motherhood further restricts educational and economic opportunities. Early pregnancy can make educational continuation even more difficult. A girl who becomes a mother during adolescence may face childcare responsibilities, restricted mobility and increased dependence on family members. Thus, the consequences of child marriage can accumulate:

Early marriage → early pregnancy → childcare responsibilities → school discontinuation → limited employment → economic dependence

This demonstrates why child marriage must be addressed together with adolescent health, reproductive health education and girls' educational retention.

6.6 Consequences for Women's Economic Empowerment

Education is strongly connected with women's economic participation. A girl who completes secondary or higher-secondary education has greater opportunities to acquire vocational skills, pursue higher education and enter employment. Conversely, early marriage can reduce these opportunities. Domestic responsibilities, childcare and restrictions on mobility can prevent young women from entering formal or informal employment. For rural Tripura, this has implications for household and community development. Women's economic participation can contribute to household income, savings, children's education and local economic activity. Therefore, preventing child marriage should be considered an economic empowerment strategy as well as a child protection strategy.

6.7 Child Marriage and Rural Development

Rural development is not simply about roads, infrastructure, agriculture and income. Human development is equally important. The development of rural communities depends upon the development of their human resources. Girls constitute a significant part of this resource. When rural girls are prevented from completing their education because of early marriage, the consequences extend beyond the individual household.

Child marriage affect:

- Educational attainment;
- Women's labour-force participation;
- Household income;
- Maternal and child health;
- Children's educational outcomes;
- Women's participation in local governance;
- Decision-making within households; and
- Overall community development.

Thus, eliminating child marriage should be incorporated into the broader rural development agenda of Tripura.



6.8 Rural Girls and the Cycle of Intergenerational Disadvantage

One of the most important consequences of child marriage is its potential to reproduce disadvantage across generations. A girl who leaves school early may have limited employment opportunities. Her economic dependence may reduce her bargaining power within the household. If she has children at a young age, her ability to invest in her own education and career may become even more restricted. Her children may subsequently grow up in households with limited economic resources.

This creates an intergenerational cycle:

Low income → limited education → child marriage → early motherhood → economic dependence → limited opportunities for children

Breaking this cycle requires ensuring that girls remain in education long enough to acquire capabilities that can transform their life trajectories.

7. MAJOR CHALLENGES IN PREVENTING CHILD MARRIAGE IN RURAL TRIPURA

Several challenges require particular attention:

7.1 Social Acceptance

In some communities, early marriage may continue to be viewed as normal or desirable. Legal prohibition alone cannot change deeply embedded social norms.

7.2 Poverty

Economic hardship can encourage families to prioritise immediate household considerations over long-term investment in girls' education.

7.3 Educational Discontinuation

Where secondary and higher-secondary education is difficult to access, marriage may become an alternative pathway for adolescent girls.

7.4 Limited Awareness

Families and adolescents may not fully understand the legal, educational, health and economic consequences of child marriage. Less than 1 per cent of girls married as minors are aware of their right to seek annulment.

7.5 Gender Inequality

Persistent expectations concerning women's domestic roles can reduce the perceived value of prolonged education for girls.

7.6 Weak Coordination

Effective prevention requires coordination among schools, Panchayati Raj institutions, Child Marriage Prohibition Officers, social welfare agencies, police, health workers, teachers and community organisations.

8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Strengthen Girls' Secondary and Higher-Secondary Education

Government intervention should focus particularly on retaining girls after Class VIII and through secondary and higher-secondary education.

Scholarships, free educational materials, transportation support and residential facilities can help rural girls remain in school.

8.2 Establish Community-Based Child Marriage Prevention Mechanisms

Village-level institutions should actively monitor vulnerable adolescents while maintaining a child-rights-based and non-stigmatising approach.

Panchayats, schools, Anganwadi centres, women's groups and youth organisations can work together to identify risks early.

8.3 Strengthen Implementation of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act

The law provides for Child Marriage Prohibition Officers whose responsibilities include preventing child marriages, collecting evidence, creating awareness and sensitising communities.

Effective implementation requires adequate staffing, training, coordination and accountability at the local level. CMPOs should be integrated with school attendance monitoring systems to enable early warning when girls are at risk of dropout.

8.4 Provide Economic Incentives for Girls' Education

Conditional scholarships and educational support programmes should encourage girls to complete secondary and higher-secondary education.

The focus should be on education retention rather than merely school enrolment.

8.5 Expand Skill Development and Livelihood Opportunities

Rural girls should have access to vocational education, digital skills, entrepreneurship training and employment-oriented education.

When families see education as contributing to economic independence, the social value of delaying marriage can increase.

8.6 Strengthen Adolescent Health Education

Schools and community institutions should provide age-appropriate information regarding reproductive health, nutrition, rights and available health services.

This is particularly important in areas where teenage pregnancy remains significant.

8.7 Engage Men and Boys

Child marriage is not only a women's issue. Boys, fathers, male community leaders and husbands must also be included in awareness and gender-equity programmes.



8.8 Promote Women's Self-Help Groups

Women's Self-Help Groups can become important platforms for discussing girls' education, early marriage, livelihood opportunities and gender equality.

Their role can extend beyond microfinance to community mobilisation and social awareness.

8.9 Improve Rural Infrastructure

Access to secondary schools, safe transportation, hostels, digital connectivity and sanitary facilities can make a significant difference to girls' ability to continue education.

8.10 Strengthen Data-Based Monitoring

District-level data should be regularly examined to identify villages and communities where girls are at higher risk of school dropout or early marriage. Educational and child-protection databases should be used for preventive intervention rather than only post-event response. Linking school attendance alerts with CMPOs and Anganwadi workers can enable early identification of at-risk girls.

9. CONCLUSION

Child marriage remains a significant obstacle to the education and development of rural girls in Tripura. The high prevalence of early marriage in the state demonstrates the magnitude of the problem and places Tripura among the Indian states with particularly high levels of child marriage. The consequences of child marriage extend far beyond marriage itself. Early marriage can interrupt education, increase the likelihood of early pregnancy, restrict employment opportunities, reduce economic independence and reinforce gender inequality. At the community level, these effects can weaken human capital formation and slow inclusive rural development. The solution therefore cannot be limited to legal enforcement. Preventing child marriage in Tripura requires a comprehensive strategy that combines education, poverty reduction, women's empowerment, adolescent health, livelihood development, community participation and effective implementation of child-protection laws. The most important intervention is to ensure that rural girls remain in school and have meaningful opportunities beyond marriage. A rural development strategy that invests in girls' education is simultaneously investing in healthier families, stronger local economies, greater women's participation and more sustainable communities. Ultimately, the development of Tripura's rural society depends not only on physical infrastructure and economic growth but also on expanding the capabilities and choices of its young women. Ending child marriage should therefore be understood as an essential component of gender equality, human development and inclusive rural development in Tripura.

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