CSR Initiatives Of Companies Regarding Dropouts And Child Marriages During COVID-19 In India

Sneha Banerjee

Research Scholar, Dept. of Social Work, Visva-Bharati.

Dr. Sudeshna Saha

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Social Work, Visva-Bharati.

Abstract

The dropout rate and child marriages, particularly in developing countries, have long been complex, and the COVID-19 epidemic has worsened matters. The primary aim of this research is to examine how COVID-19 affected dropout rates and child marriages. This study also looks into the steps Indian corporations have taken to prevent dropouts and underage marriages.

To protect themselves from the deadly coronavirus, nations initiated lockdowns (the normal functioning of a country is disrupted for the safety of the public), which ensures the protection of its citizens. While the lockdown severely affects the masses' financial conditions, the dropout rate increases with financial pressures. Data for the study was gathered from national and international organisations and various papers and pieces of evaluated literature. The study identifies the elements that affected the number of school dropouts and child marriages during the pandemic, with economic circumstances, lockdown effects, corporate initiatives, learning styles, and sociocultural impacts among the most important. Finally, the research examined the consequences of child marriages and dropouts in India during the crucial period of COVID-19.

Keywords: **COVID-19, Child marriage, Dropouts, CSR Intervention.**

Introduction

According to Census 2011, there are 33.8 million child marriages and 84 million dropouts. (Census, 2011). To fan the flames, COVID-19, the recent past global scenario had somehow affected these two arenas greatly. The COVID-19, a respiratory disease cradled at Wuhan, China in 2019, gradually spread its tentacles to the whole world. The pandemic brought about lockdown in the nation which restricted the

movement of people, goods and services, creating problems for the daily waged workers (UNICEF, 2021). The first few months of lockdown showed us pathetic pictures of labourers along with their families coming back to home towns by walking miles of distances, many even lost their lives during this journey. The pandemic period not only created a scarcity of food and medicines but all sectors were touched; loss of livelihood, restriction to public places, closure of educational institutes (UNICEF, 2021). The domestic violence, trafficking of women and girls, child marriages increased manifold in the COVID-19 phase. as it trapped the women with their abusers at home (UN Women, 2021). The children were suffering due to food shortage, health and nutrition scarcity, disruption of education, increased risk of dropouts, child marriages and child labour (UNICEF, 2021).

Objectives

The objectives of the study:
i)   To explore the effects of COVID-19 on child marriage.

ii)   To analyse the impact of COVID-19 on the dropouts.

iii)   To find out initiatives taken by Indian companies to combat child marriages and dropouts.

Methodology

Qualitative research design is used through descriptive study. Content analysis, a qualitative research tool is used here, to examine the data.

Methods of data collection

This study primarily depends upon secondary data. Data used were taken from internationally and nationally recognised organisations like UNICEF(United Nations Children's Fund), ILO (International Labour Organization), NSO (National Statistical Office), CRY (Child Rights and You) along with various literatures; reports of companies containing CSR activities, funding, work implementations, books and journals and websites.

Child marriage

Child marriage is when a child i.e., a girl below 18 years and a boy below 21 is married to an adult or with another child. As per UNICEF reports, on average, 27% of girl children in India are married off before their 18th birthday, 7% by the time they are 15. Be it child marriage, education, employment, or the exercise of fundamental rights, India is still lagging in gender equality (Karma, 2018). Cultural beliefs are also one of the factors that leads to the illegal practice of child marriage.

Concerning the girls, they are a victim of this patriarchal community whose orthodox thinking led them to be brides before being adults (Karma, 2018). The girls are thought to be an economic liability who are unable to tend and defend themselves, so marrying them off would have one less mouth to feed. Another significant cause is dowry, which even after the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 is still rampant more or less in every area. Where the fathers and brothers work to do away with the girl to another house which reduces

their liability. They are married off to partners of double their age or with another child as they are thought to be a burden that is needed to get rid of. The girls are not educated, they are made to stomach the fact from childhood that they live to cater for the husbands as well as their in-laws and bear children. They are fed that their choices, preferences, and desires are insignificant, what they can do is to adjust with every odd. The crime of child marriage takes the life of the child due to early pregnancy, sexual abuse, lack of sexual education, contracting HIV, and many more.

It would be wrong to say that only girls are the victims of child marriage, boys are equally victims of this ugly act that is being carried out for ages. Though girls are generally more affected as they are forced to marry an adult much older than them, young boys are also trapped in child marriage. Boys make about one in seven of the 765 million child marriages that occur worldwide, according to UNICEF. (Sharma, 2019). The prevalence of child marriage among boys is higher in rural parts of the society (Misunas et.al., 2019). Similar to girls, boys who enter in an early union are also at risk of early fatherhood, responsibilities of providing for households, and lack of sexual education leading to bad family planning (Misunas et.al., 2019). The young boys are married to increase the progeny number who would carry forward the growth of the family in size. According to the orthodox perspective, if a boy is married at a younger age, he would bear children which would enhance the family as there would be more hands to work for the family, more hands mean more income, rather than investing time in education. Another significant cause for child marriage among boys is due to the age-old custom of procuring dowry.

The fact that education is a protective factor for girls against child marriage but this shield was taken away from them due to school closures in COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2021). UNICEF estimates that the pandemic will put up to 10 million more girls at risk of becoming child brides worldwide during the course of the next ten years. Without regarding the girls as potential wage earners the financially vulnerable families are recognizing them as an obligation to be married off to curb the economic strain (Affoum & Recaverran, 2020). Covid- 19 has made the situation of girls worst due to schools being shut down, lack of friends and support, a rise of the poverty level.

COVID-19 and child marriage

Over the course of the following ten years, 13 million more child marriages might occur globally due to the impact of COVID-19, according to UNICEF's prediction. Recent events have made it clear that India is already following the pattern. The nation now has 23 million child brides, which is the biggest number worldwide. That makes up one-third of the total worldwide. In India, 7% of girls under the age of 15 and over 27% of females under the age of 18 were married at younger ages. In India, at least 1.5 million girls under the age of 18 are wed annually, and close to 16% of teenage girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are already married (Wesley,2022). (Unicef)

Although COVID-19 has affected the children in a less severe manner with respect to deaths and hospitalization but this virus affected their lives indirectly (Jejeebhoy, 2021). The girls were more vulnerable than the boys in this pandemic. In a phone poll of teenagers in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha, 8% of respondents said they were aware of at least one such case of child marriage in their

neighbourhood after the lockdown was implemented, and in a phone survey of youth in four states (Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha), 8% of youth reported familiarity with at least one case of child marriage in their neighbourhood after the lockdown was implemented, and 2-3% reported that plans for their marriage had already begun(Jejeebhoy, 2021), and more girls than boys reported that the pandemic had increased their chances of getting married early (Centre for Catalysing Change, 2021). In a study of youths (66% female, 71% under 18) conducted in Bihar, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh in May 2020 (one month after the imposition of the national lockdown), only 3% of participants nationwide reported that their families were pressuring them to drop out of school so they could get married, but this number was high as to 10% in Uttar Pradesh (Jejeebhoy, 2021).

Dropout

One of the key determinants of progress in every country is education. It significantly contributes to improving people's knowledge of the world and of themselves. Additionally, education is essential for ensuring social and economic advancement as well as for balancing income. Without significant investments in human capital, no nation in the world can achieve sustainable economic growth (Kumar et, al, 2023). The world's largest teenage population resides in India. Nevertheless, many underprivileged Indian teenagers still struggle to finish their education (Kumar et, al, 2023). There are 259.6 million children in India between the ages of five and fourteen as per the 2011 Census. 10.1 million of them, or 3.9% of all children, are employed as "main workers" or "marginal workers." Furthermore, according to the ILO, over 42.7 million children in India do not attend school. According to a recent survey by the National Statistical Office (NSO), 17.5% of upper elementary pupils and 12.6% of secondary students in India respectively stopped their studies. A dropout is defined as an "ever-enrolled person" who has never finished the final level of school for which they have registered and is not presently enrolled in any educational setting. Even while the government's Right to Education Act and National Policy on Education may have encouraged everyone to receive education, assessing the system's viability and effectiveness is equally necessary (Walia). According to the survey by the National Statistical Office (NSO) the top three reasons for leaving school early by the children were determined to be domestic help, financial hardship, and lack of interest. About 36.90% of boys dropped out of school because they had to support their families, compared to about 30.2% of girls who cited domestic labour as their reason for quitting school. Girls find it more challenging to complete their studies as a result of worries about their safety. They have hygienic issues as a result of inadequate educational facilities, which finally forces them to remain at home. Many girls are required to remain at home or are compelled to get married young because they are seen as a responsibility (link) (13.2%) (Walia).

COVID-19 and Dropout

The COVID-19 viral pandemic that occurred in 2020 changed how humans think, act, and communicate. Of course, education could not be an exception, thus drastic modifications and revisions were implemented. The government took the decision to shut down all educational institutions until further notice, synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning techniques became more popular. Students adjusted to a new

pattern of instruction and learning as they attempt to study using new digital tools for distance learning, such as Webex, Skype, Zoom, Messenger, etc., while learning in the comfort of their own homes (Tsolou, 2021).

A survey presented by Centre for Catalysing Change depicts that during the lockdown, girls were more involved in household cleaning, cooking, taking care of siblings, and fetching water from wells than boys. While boys were forced to support the family through income generation, they went out to get essentials for home. The study shows girls had to contribute more time to household chores than boys (Centre for Catalysing Change, 2021). Access to mobiles and the internet and increased burden posed challenges for adolescents to access education. However, girls faced this challenge more due to limited access to mobiles and the internet and the increased burden of household chores (Centre for Catalysing Change, 2021). UNESCO estimates that nearly 158 million girls enrolled in school or university in India, are currently out of school because of COVID-19 closures.

CSR Initiatives of Different Companies to combat the COVID-19 in regard to Child Marriage and Child Dropout

Numerous companies came up to tackle the situation of COVID-19, with particular reliance on education and child issues. Children, the future of India, faced tremendous problems in this crucial period, be it the reach of education; coping with economic scarcity, facing cruel child marriage; or dropping out of school due to various factors. Few such initiatives are mentioned:

Tata Chemicals Limited (TCL) with a project of 1.4 crore came up to assist the needy ones with their educational initiatives across sites to guarantee zero dropouts and enhance instruction. 23,000 kids benefited from online lessons, scholarships, videos, and WhatsApp groups established for continuing education during the epidemic. Their Learning & Migration Programme benefited 6,012 kids by improving their academic performance and fortifying the local school administration. Scholarships from TCL were awarded to 224 college and high school students. TCL offered pupils, with a concentration on female students, career information with a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) emphasis. TCL assisted in the operation of school enrichment clubs by giving underprivileged pupils access to resources (CSRBox, 2021). Ultratech, one of India's biggest cement companies gave to the CSR by supporting the School Education Programme through enrolment awareness programs/events, formal schools off-campus (run by the company), educational supplies (study materials, uniforms, books, etc.), scholarships (merit-based aid), school competitions / best teacher award, cultural events, quality of education (support teachers, improve education methods), specialised coaching, exposure visits/awareness. There are about 9,500 kids enrolled in the 250 anganwadis the firm supports. 16 anganwadis have been repaired by the firm in Raw, Shambhupura (Rajasthan), and Dhar (Madhya Pradesh).

To upgrade the infrastructure and give kids a comfortable learning environment, Pidilite Industries Limited has sponsored the upkeep and renovation of 129 government schools. The COVID-19 pandemic had an influence on WaGaLe's (Wanchan-Ganan-Lekhan program is to provide assistance in improving literacy of students in primary schools with respect to reading (Wachan), basic counting (Ganan) and writing (Lekhan) regular operation. With more than 700 kids, the programme was only partially sustained. The

business has maintained to support the Shri N N Mehta Memorial study Trust, which gave 302 worthy children scholarships totalling 42.57 lakh for further study. The increase in pupils receiving awards/scholarships is a sign that the region's educational standards have improved. The business has kept funding Bhavnagar's Shri Balvant Parekh Scientific City, a contemporary scientific museum (CSRBox, 2021).

Six schools are run by Grasim the flagship company of the Aditya Birla Group, which has a total enrolment of 6,349 students. 456 girls were academically helped through coaching, and study materials. They even came up with different counselling programmes for students and parents which tried to deal with the problem of child marriage and dropouts. Scholarships for 170 students in Halol, Harihar (Maharashtra) were given. At Rishra, Renukoot, 106 students in classes XI and XII received specialised training for the JEE and NEET exams for low-income, first-generation students so that financially disadvantaged students can continue their education and not dropout school. The initiative has garnered a great deal of praise from several stakeholders and has also earned media attention (CSRBox 2021).

Welspun India Limited, a Mumbai based textile company, supported several education-related programmes by contributing to the Smart Class Project, Advance Learning, Para Teacher, Siksha Saathi, Ved Shala, and other initiatives, including infrastructure. By combining the previous three programs—Gyankunj, Para Teachers, and Learning Levels—and enabling community volunteers to advance education, the project seeks to start a revolution at the local level, where the family and students were made well concerned regarding the social evils like child marriage and child dropouts. Interventions in education are grounded in the Foundation's philosophy, which advocates for a comprehensive approach. Through education, they hope to provide every student in their partner schools with a sense of self, purpose, and meaning in life. Its goal is to improve instructors' and students' teaching and learning results by utilising technology in a grassroots educational revolution.

These interventions by the companies are creditworthy, where they are not only working for benefiting the children with monetary terms but trying to diminish the social evil too.

Discussion

Since students' current learning process has significantly declined during this unprecedented crisis, particularly in schools in low socioeconomic areas (Tsolou, 2021). The lockdown will last or what the long-term effects of this situation may be on students' cognitive, educational, social, and emotional development. Estimates of the long-term economic consequences to students' families and communities at large are also not achievable. The total wellbeing of its members will be negatively impacted by the former's inevitable severe income losses and the latter's anticipated slower economic development (Chetty, 2020). The cohort of pupils impacted by the sudden but protracted closure of schools is probably experiencing a commensurate long-term effect. Maintaining children in the school system is of the utmost importance for their emotional stability, developing their social skills, and protecting their intellectual foundation (Tsolou, 2021).

If a child's multifaceted and overall development is the goal of education, then the educational community's efforts should be increased in order to support and enhance not only the knowledge imparted but also the child's socialisation and emotional development (Babalis, 2021). In this vein, it is crucial that teachers, who are in daily contact with students and are expected to be knowledgeable about matters relating to familial, cultural, and cognitive differences among them as well as their special educational needs, are aware of the factors that contribute to early school leaving and attempt to eliminate them through a supportive and positive classroom (physical or virtual) climate and their daily work in general. Schools should thus continue to carefully track each student's engagement, keeping track of their attendance, behaviour, and academic development. The provision of the necessary equipment for participation in e-learning could be a viable solution. Efforts to maintain contact and boost students' confidence should be continuous, and in the event that potential obstacles to students' easy participation in the process of modern distant education are identified, these should be addressed immediately. Students who require it should receive individualised help for both enhancing their learning disabilities and overcoming any challenges they may have using current technologies. By providing learning opportunities tailored to each student, individualising education might improve learning for all students and mitigate the losses caused by school closure (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020).

More child marriages have been recorded globally due to the worldwide pandemic. From a gender perspective, child marriage is less common among males, therefore girls continue to be the major focus when discussing its effects. Girls suffer most of the physical repercussions of child marriage, such as early pregnancy (CRY,2021). Child marriage rises when parents struggle financially and girls are denied access to education. Companies can come up with different initiatives to end child marriage like providing them continued education, job training, creating leadership clubs, access to health services and advocating the girls' rights. For providing the same companies can come up with counselling sessions for children and their parents; to educate the children about the harmful effects of child marriage, where to contact regarding a forced marriage, immediate reporting of child marriages they are aware of. Parents should be made aware of the physical, psychological, and emotional problems a child can face if married before adulthood. Early marriage increases the likelihood that a girl may give birth before her body is ready, which might cause difficulties that could endanger her health for the rest of her life; early marriage prevents a girl from getting the career options that might assist her and her family escape poverty; early marriage frequently forces a girl to leave school, depriving her of an education and the advantages and opportunities it offers her (Vowforgirls).

Conclusion

A significant number of children is falling back either by dropping out or getting married at an earlier age. They are getting out of the marathon of life. The generation is suffering intellectual losses and will not be able to maintain the scientific research, development, and accomplishments of earlier ages since they won't be included in the race that demands them to keep up with others. If we wish to safeguard our future, we must thus address the issue of student dropout and child marriages, especially in developing nations. The

corporate sector is also developing a variety of measures to address these societal problems. More must be done to bring the underprivileged back into the mainstream.

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