



A Stolen Innocence: Tackling Child Marriage As A Human Rights Urgency

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Abstract: Child marriage, the union of children under 18, infringes upon their rights, including education and health. This study underscores the loss of innocence experienced by these young individuals, emphasizing its severity. Not only a breach of basic human rights, child marriage perpetuates poverty, inequality, and gender discrimination cycles. It deprives children of education, exposing them to harm and limiting personal growth. Addressing this issue necessitates comprehensive strategies: legal reforms, community involvement, and awareness campaigns. Empowering girls through education is pivotal in preventing child marriage. The study calls for urgent action, rallying individuals, communities, governments, and organizations to safeguard children's rights globally. Prioritizing girls' education and raising awareness are essential steps towards eradicating this practice and ensuring children can lead lives free from abuse, embracing their full potential.

Keywords: Stolen Innocence; Combating Child Marriage; Human Rights Crisis; Collective efforts

I. INTRODUCTION

This is a poignant and impactful theme that captures the devastating consequences of child marriage and the urgent need to address it as a human rights crisis. It is also rightly cited as "Marriage steals childhood," by UNICEF Executive Director.

Child marriage refers to the marriage or union of a child under the age of 18, violating their rights to education, health, and freedom. The refined title emphasizes the loss of innocence that children experience when forced into early marriages, highlighting the gravity of the issue. Child marriage is not only a violation of basic human rights but also perpetuates a cycle of poverty, inequality, and gender-based discrimination. It denies children their right to education, exposes them to physical and emotional harm, and restricts their personal development and opportunities for a better future. Addressing child marriage requires a comprehensive approach that involves legal reforms, community engagement, and awareness campaigns. It is crucial to work towards empowering girls, providing them with education, and fostering an environment that supports their rights and aspirations. By framing child marriage as a human rights crisis, the study prompts action and underscores the need for urgent intervention. It compels individuals, communities, governments, and

organizations to recognize the severity of the issue and join forces to protect the rights and well-being of children worldwide.

It compromises the development of girls and boys. Moreover, it often results in early pregnancy, poor health, little education and social isolation. Education is a powerful tool in preventing child marriage. By improving access and eliminating gender disparities in education, we can reduce the likelihood of girls marrying at a young age. Every child deserves the chance to reach their full potential. Let's create a society that supports all children to say 'Yes' to education and to say big 'No' to child marriage, emphasizing these messages during awareness campaigns to raise awareness about the violation of human rights.

Now is the critical moment to prioritize girls' education, raise community awareness, and safeguard children from the scourge of child marriage. Let us ensure that children can embrace their childhood and envision a society where no girl falls victim to any form of abuse, particularly child marriage. Let us grant children the freedom to live their lives to the fullest. Several studies found that the practice of child marriage to be the worst stand in need of urgent attention in order to meet the country's development goals. There are reasons cited by several studies that few people does not have enough awareness of the consequences of child marriage and there is also a big need to invest more in child rights, child development, girls' education and girls' empowerment. Moreover, due to lack of social awareness, some parents and community people remain unaware of the adverse effect of child marriage. Overall, this study encapsulates the gravity of child marriage and calls for collective efforts to end this harmful practice, ensuring that every child can grow up free, safe, and empowered to fulfil their potential. Hence an attempt is taken to analyze scientifically about a study on child marriage, a violation of human rights among women in rural community and strategies to end the practice.

1.1 Introduction: Safeguarding the Rights of Every Child: A Collective Responsibility-All children have Rights that needs to be protected. As articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) -an internationally recognized legal framework ratified by a majority of countries- the universally acknowledged age of maturity is set at 18 for girls and 21 for boys. Consequently, this mandates that all individuals within the village/town/city who are below the age of 18 years are to be regarded as children and necessitate requisite assistance and support.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) stands as a resolute affirmation that every child, irrespective of their ethnic background, gender, religion, linguistic affiliation, abilities, or any other characteristic, inherently possesses certain rights. It is imperative to perceive the Convention as an interconnected whole, where each right is interdependent, and no single right takes precedence over another.

1.2 Outlined within the UNCRC are several pivotal articles that underscore the significance of safeguarding and nurturing the well-being of children:

Article 6 - Right to Life: At the core of the UNCRC is the fundamental right to life, articulating the essential premise that every child has the inherent right to survive and thrive in an environment that ensures their well-being.

Article 13 - Right to Freedom of Expression: Children are granted the right to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions freely, with this article emphasizing the importance of enabling their active participation in matters that affect them.

Article 16 - Right to Privacy: This article underscores the necessity of safeguarding a child's privacy, recognizing that every child has the right to a space where their personal life remains respected and protected.

Article 19 & Article 24- Right to Protection from Exploitation (Economic & Sexual): Protection from all forms of exploitation, including economic and sexual exploitation, is a paramount concern highlighted in this article. It reinforces the obligation to shield children from circumstances that could lead to their exploitation.

Article 21-Right to Life & Right to Personal Liberty &Article 21 A-Right to Free & Compulsory Education

Article 23 - Rights for Children with Disabilities: Addressing inclusivity, this article acknowledges the rights of children with disabilities, asserting their right to live a full and dignified life, with access to necessary support and resources.

Article 27 - Right to Have a Proper House, Food, and Clothing: This article emphasizes the right of every child to a standard of living that guarantees their well-being, including access to adequate housing, nutrition, and clothing.

Article 28 - Right to Education: This article emphasizes the entitlement of every child to receive an education that is conducive to their personal development, fostering respect for human rights, diversity, and environmental responsibility.

Article 39 (e) & (f): "ensure that the health and strength of tender age of children are not abused" and that "the children are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and conditions of freedom and dignity" and that the childhood and youth are protected against exploitation and moral and material abandonment.

These articles collectively serve as a beacon, guiding nations and societies toward nurturing an environment where every child's rights are not just acknowledged, but zealously protected and upheld. Through these articles, the UNCRC endeavors to create a world that champions the holistic development and well-being of every child, regardless of their circumstances.

1.3 Child Marriage Prohibition Act:The objective of the Act is to proscribe the solemnization of child marriages along with associated and ancillary matters. In a resolute stride towards eradicating child marriage from society, the Government of India promulgated the Prevention of Child Marriage Act 2006, supplanting the erstwhile legislation of the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929. This contemporary legislation is fortified with empowering provisions designed to interdict child marriages, shield and provide succor to victims, and augment penalties for those who facilitate, advocate, or officiate such unions. Additionally, the Act necessitates the appointment of a Child Marriage Prohibition Officer by state governments for specific regions or the entire state.

1.4 Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO)

To efficaciously combat the grievous crimes of sexual abuse and exploitation perpetrated against children through unambiguous and more stringent legal measures, the Ministry of Women and Child Development championed the formulation of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act in 2012. This Act has been enacted to safeguard children from offenses such as sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography, while also establishing Special Courts for the expeditious trial of such crimes and related matters. In a significant stride, the Act underwent amendments in 2019, introducing provisions to intensify penalties for various offenses with the aim of deterring perpetrators and ensuring a childhood characterized by safety, security, and dignity for every child.

1.5 Research Methodology

Research Design : Descriptive design to describe the nature of the issue

Universe : Married women of 20-30 years of age group

Data collection Sources: Primary and Secondary data

Data Collection tools : Focus Group Discussion

Study Population : Studied 50 married women (20-30 years) available in the study area

1.5.1 Focus Group Discussion (FGD): Focus group discussion is frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. The method aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population. Focus group discussion requires a team consisting of a skilled facilitator and an assistant (Burrows & Kendall, 1997; Krueger, 1994). The facilitator is central to the discussion not only by managing existing relationships but also by creating a relaxed and comfortable environment for unfamiliar participants. Similarly, the assistant's role includes observing non-verbal interactions and the impact of the group dynamics, and documenting the general content of the discussion, thereby supplementing the data (Kitzinger, 1994/1995). One of the key requirements for a successful focus group discussion is a skilled and well-trained group facilitator and team members. It reflected the extent of facilitator engagement or involvement, since facilitation is central to unbiased data collection. The aim should be to assess the causes, consequences and nature and extent of specific child protection issues like violence against children, child marriage the area specific issues and importance.

1.5.2 Main-objectives

1. To describe the issues of how child marriage a violation of human rights among women in rural-community
2. To study the social impact of child marriage which affects the society and to empower community
3. To disseminate the efforts and strategies to end the practice of child marriage.
4. To discuss the strategies to cope up the issue and to promote psychological wellbeing

1.5.3 Awareness through Human Rights to end the practice of Child Marriage

Human rights are inherent to all individuals, ensuring equality for each and every one of us. These fundamental rights establish a set of principles aimed at acknowledging and safeguarding the inherent worth of every human being. They dictate the manner in which individuals coexist within society and interact with one another, as well as define their interactions with the governing State and the corresponding responsibilities that the State bears. The realm of human rights law imposes specific duties upon governments while also restraining them from engaging in certain actions.

Simultaneously, individuals are entrusted with their own set of responsibilities:

while exercising their human rights, they are obliged to uphold the rights of their fellow beings. It is imperative to recognize that no entity, whether governmental, collective, or individual, possesses the entitlement to undertake actions that infringe upon the rights of others.

They all felt Awareness programme through Human Rights to end the practice of child marriage was very informative, real eye opener, created self-awareness and fully aware of Human Rights.

They all agreed to say that child marriage a human rights issue and everyone has social responsibility to stop the practice. Moreover, they are all aware of the available legal actions like POCSO and punishments Imprisonment & Penalty against child marriage taken by the Government of India. They are partially aware of the abuses associated with Child Marriage and stated how it violate many Human Rights, lack freedom, denied reproductive health care and lead to limited access to employment opportunities.

Majority had accepted that it affected both male and female for the question of whether Child marriage affects both girls and boys. Some said it affects only girls and some are not aware of it. The women interacted through FGD were all satisfied with the healthy discussion and how it created positive changes. As a result they came forward to say that they were able to teach child to 'Say no to child marriage' and 'Say yes to child's education'. It also gave them the drive to think differently to stop child marriage and to inform Helpline/Toll free Complaint Cell number

They all said that it was really eye opener session to behave as socially responsible person, suggested the preventive measures against child marriage. They all stressed the importance of disciplined meaningful life to set a role model for children. They also assured to how to handle children to make them as responsible in handling social media. As regards the precautions they can take to stop child marriage, they answered that Reporting of any child marriage happening around them to the proper authorities; Education to friends; family and community about why child marriage is harmful; Promise to never be a part of any event that promotes child marriage; Self Discipline is must

When they asked to analyze what they can do to help stop child marriage, they responded that adequate focus to be on skill-based programme, strictly following 'legal age at marriage', empowering adolescents on legal aspects and make the community aware of harmfulness of child marriage. While discussed for suggestion to improve the situation for healthy marriage, seeking timely guidance and help to have quality life and ambition.

However, they must learn to say confidently 'I understand' and Have good Vibes & Focus on the positive side of life. Finally, they are motivated to respect each other, and in that connection, they are all aware of the importance of 'Boys must respect Girls' and 'Girls must respect Boys'. Both boys and girls must take a pledge of 'I will not marry until I am 21 years of age and I will not marry a girl less than 18 years of age!' or else I will follow 'legal age at marriage'. They are all made aware of the importance of SDGs, POCSO and Human Rights.

Table 1 Socio-Demographic Details of the Respondents

Personal Data	Categories	N (50)	Percentage
Age Group	20-29	34	68
	>30	16	32
Gender	Female	50	100
Religion	Hindu	24	48
	Christian	12	24
	Muslim	14	28
Domicile	Rural	50	100
Occupational Status	Business	27	54
	Agriculture	14	28
	Home Makers	9	18
Monthly Income of the family (Rs)	Less than 5000	11	22
	5000- 10000	32	64
	10000&above	6	12
No. of Children	1	28	56
	2	17	34
	Yet to have Children	5	10

1.5.4 The forgoing discussion clearly stated that Child marriage is a grave violation of children's rights that has devastating consequences for individuals and societies. To effectively address this issue, it is crucial to empower and protect children, equipping them with sufficient knowledge, critical thinking skills, and the confidence to make informed choices about their lives.

By implementing a range of measures that focus on education, awareness, gender equality, community involvement, and legal protection, we can create an environment that safeguards children from child marriage and enables them to lead fulfilling and empowered lives.

1.5.4 .1 Education lies at the heart of empowering children and protecting them from child marriage. Quality education should be accessible to all children, regardless of their gender, socioeconomic background, or geographical location. It is essential to promote inclusive and gender-sensitive educational policies that not only eliminate barriers to education but also address the underlying societal norms that perpetuate child marriage. Comprehensive sexuality education should be an integral part of the curriculum, providing children with accurate information about their bodies, relationships, consent, and reproductive health. By equipping children with knowledge, they can make informed decisions and understand their rights, enabling them to reject child marriage and pursue their aspirations.

1.5.4 .2 Critical thinking skills are instrumental in empowering children to challenge and question societal norms, including those that support child marriage. Schools should incorporate critical thinking and life skills training, which encourage children to analyze and evaluate information, develop problem-solving abilities, and build resilience. These skills help children recognize the consequences of child marriage and make informed choices about their futures. By fostering critical thinking, we can empower children to resist societal pressures and overcome the challenges that contribute to child marriage.

1.5.4 .3 Confidence-building is essential in enabling children to assert their rights and protect themselves against child marriage. Providing safe spaces and supportive environments where children can express their opinions, ask questions, and share their concerns without fear of judgment is crucial. Engaging children in discussions and decision-making processes concerning their lives fosters their self-esteem and confidence. It is important to empower children to voice their opinions, participate in community initiatives, and advocate for their rights. When children are confident and empowered, they are better equipped to resist child marriage and pursue a life of their choosing.

1.5.4 .6 Creating awareness about child marriage is vital for preventing this harmful practice. **1.5.4 .7** Awareness campaigns should target children, parents, teachers, community leaders, and the wider public. These campaigns should highlight the negative consequences of child marriage on children's physical and mental well-being, education, and long-term prospects. By providing accurate information and dispelling myths, communities can develop a deeper understanding of the harm caused by child marriage. Media, including television, radio, and social media platforms, can play a pivotal role in disseminating information and fostering public discourse on child marriage.

1.5.5 Promoting gender equality is essential in protecting children from child marriage. Gender norms and stereotypes often perpetuate child marriage, as girls are disproportionately affected. Efforts should focus on challenging discriminatory attitudes and practices, promoting equal opportunities for girls, and empowering them to become agents of change. By promoting gender equality, we create an environment where girls can thrive, assert their rights, and envision a future free from child marriage. Engaging boys and men in conversations around gender equality is equally important, as they play a crucial role in transforming social norms and attitudes.

1.5.5.1 Legal protection is a critical component of safeguarding children from child marriage. Strengthening and enforcing legislation that sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 for both boys and girls is essential. Efforts should be made to eliminate legal loopholes, raise awareness about existing laws, and ensure their effective implementation. Establishing mechanisms for reporting and responding to cases of child marriage, such as specialized child protection units and helplines, is crucial. Legal interventions should also focus on improving birth registration systems, as this helps establish the age of individuals and acts as a preventive measure against child marriage.

Hence, empowering and protecting children is crucial for safeguarding them against child marriage. By focusing on education, critical thinking skills, confidence-building, awareness campaigns, gender equality, and legal protection, the families can equip children with the tools to make informed decisions and resist child marriage.

It is our collective responsibility to create an environment where every child can grow, thrive, and fulfill their potential, free from the bonds of child marriage. By investing in children's empowerment, we invest in a brighter and more equitable future for all.

1.5.6 Conclusion

Child marriage is a multifaceted issue deeply entwined with societal, cultural, economic, and legal factors. Effectively addressing this problem demands a comprehensive approach that concurrently tackles its diverse contributing factors.

Many instances of child marriage persist due to deeply ingrained cultural norms and traditions. Initiatives aimed at shifting these norms necessitate respectful engagement with communities. Encouraging changes that align with human rights principles while respecting cultural diversity is essential.

Establishing and enforcing legal frameworks that set a minimum age for marriage is crucial. Strengthening legal mechanisms and raising awareness about existing laws can act as deterrents and ensure those responsible for child marriages are held accountable.

Education is a potent catalyst for change. Ensuring girls have access to quality education equips them with knowledge and skills, empowering them to delay marriage. Education also fosters awareness about the adverse consequences of child marriage, contributing to its prevention.

Empowering girls and women with information, skills, and resources enhances their ability to make informed decisions about their lives. Empowered women are more likely to resist early marriage and advocate for their rights. Child marriage puts young girls at risk of physical, emotional, and psychological harm. Ensuring their well-being requires protecting them from early marriage and its associated negative outcomes. Upholding their rights means giving them agency over their own lives and choices.

The analysis reveals several critical views on Holistic Approach:

Tackling child marriage requires a comprehensive strategy that doesn't focus on just one aspect of the problem. All the mentioned components are interconnected and contribute to a more effective solution.

Collaborative Efforts: Governments, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, educators, legal authorities, and international agencies need to collaborate to address child marriage from all angles.

Sustainability: Sustainable change involves not only preventing child marriages but also providing support systems for girls who are at risk or have experienced early marriage. This could include access to health services, vocational training, and psychosocial support.

Long-Term Vision: Eradicating child marriage is a long-term endeavor that requires patience and persistence. Progress might not be immediate, but a sustained effort is crucial.

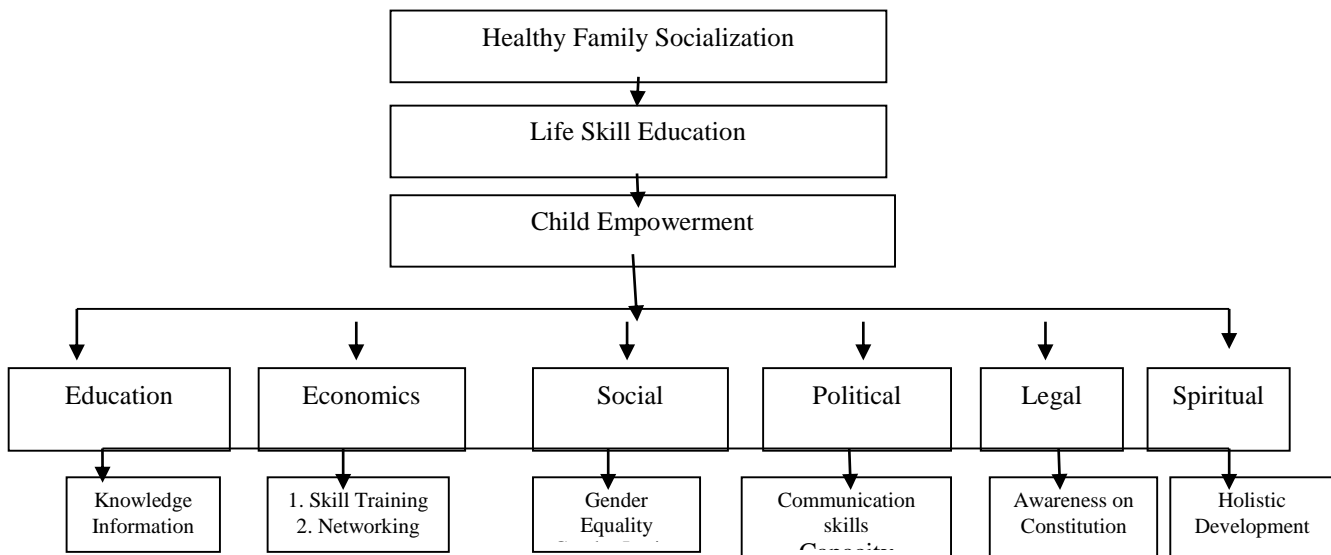
In summary, it emphasizes that a holistic approach involving cultural sensitivity, legal reforms, education, and women's empowerment is necessary to effectively combat child marriage. Such an approach acknowledges the complexity of the issue and aims to create lasting change that promotes the rights and well-being of young children.

Raising Human Rights awareness shields children from social malevolence. By instilling knowledge about their inherent rights and freedoms, youngsters become less vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and neglect. Empowered with understanding, they can identify wrongdoing and seek help confidently. Education in Human Rights fosters a safer environment, nurturing respect and dignity for every child.

In addition to legal measures, eradicating child marriage necessitates a collaborative approach among Parents, Teachers, and Community leaders. Parents play a pivotal role by understanding the importance of education and advocating against early unions. Teachers contribute by imparting knowledge about the negative consequences of child marriage, fostering critical thinking and empowering students, especially girls, to envision a future beyond marriage at a young age.

Community leaders hold the power to influence societal norms, challenging traditional beliefs that perpetuate child marriage. Through workshops, awareness campaigns, and open discussions, they can shift mindsets and garner support for legal interventions.

Collective efforts ensure a comprehensive strategy that addresses cultural, economic, and educational factors contributing to child marriage. By working together, these stakeholders create a protective environment for children, enabling them to thrive, complete their education, and delay marriage until they are physically, mentally, and emotionally prepared.

Chart 1- Model of empowering children in the Digital era

The moral message behind stopping the practice of child marriage is rooted in safeguarding the fundamental rights and well-being of children. It reflects the belief that every child deserves the opportunity to grow, learn, and develop in a safe and nurturing environment.

Child marriage undermines these rights by subjecting children, especially young girls, to physical, emotional, and psychological harm. The message conveys the importance of valuing their autonomy, education, and future aspirations over outdated customs.

Furthermore, it highlights the need to treat children as individuals with inherent rights rather than as commodities for transaction. Stopping child marriage emphasizes the moral duty to protect the vulnerable, ensure equality, and promote social progress. It's a call to end harmful practices and to promote a society where children are given the chance to thrive, contribute meaningfully, and break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and inequality.

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