



Perception of Youth towards Increase in Age of Marriage of Girls

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Abstract

The government's decision to raise minimum age for marriage of girls through Prohibition of Child Marriage Amendment Bill, 2021 led to a debate across the country. Some of the intellectuals and women activists were of the view that increasing marriage age may only strengthen patriarchy and would take away an adult women's right to choice. They said that when a woman, at the age of 18 years has the right to choose a government, such decision violates women's rights in many ways. While others opined that this decision would provide girls opportunity to study more, get better employment, become more empowered and make their life better. With the objective to have an understanding of the perception of youth towards this bill to increase the minimum age of marriage of girls, an online survey was conducted on students of Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (Haryana). A total of 1270 students both male (323) and female (947) from all kind of social and economic backgrounds participated in the survey. The findings of revealed that a large majority of respondents across all socio-economic backgrounds (76.14 percent female respondents as compared to 56.75 percent male) were strongly agreed with the Bill. They believed that increase in age of marriage would enhance educational and career opportunities for girls and they would become more mature to carry out responsibilities of the family in a better way.

Keywords: Child marriage, bill, age, empowerment

Introduction

Child marriage is defined as a marriage of a boy or a girl before the legal age of marriage. Legal age of marriage has been defined as 21 for males and 18 for females in India. Child marriages are performed in two ways. One, where a young girl below the age of 18 is married to an adult man and second, where the girl and the boy are married before they reach the legal age of marriage. Child marriage is a part of customary practice affecting both girl and the boy, but it affects girls disproportionately. In many developing countries including India, girls are more likely to get married before their legal age. These marriages are also called as forced marriages, as the young girls are not mature enough to give their choice for a life partner and understanding the responsibilities of marriage. Early marriage has profound effect on girl's health, educational and employment opportunities, rather it brings her overall well-being at risk. In the name of culture and tradition it creates systematic barriers in realizing human rights of adolescents.

Difficult to trace the origin of child marriage, it is a deeply rooted social norm, prevailing at different levels of society. The marriage of young girls is justified in the name of culture which operates under the institution of patriarchy. Besides, numerous economic and social factors add the

vulnerability of girls. Low status accorded to the girl child, poverty, lack of educational opportunities, safety concerns about girls and control over sexuality are some of the possible factors responsible for child marriage. Girls belonging to poor rural families are affected the most.

It is an established fact that child marriage brings multiple consequences for the girl, ranging from poor reproductive health to socio-economic vulnerabilities. They can get exposed to early pregnancy, malnutrition, child birth related complications, higher fertility, maternal mortality and poor infant health. They are more likely to experience adverse pregnancy outcomes than older women.

Attempts have been made to respond to this evil practice not only at the national, but also at the international level. In 1962, recognizing the importance of raising the age of marriage, the United Nations adopted the Marriage Convention. Later in 1979 the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) acknowledged child marriage as a violation of human rights. CEDAW in its Article 16, Marriage and Family Life, states that all men and women should be allowed to enjoy the right to choose the spouse and to have the same

responsibilities. Child marriage is on global development agenda and has been included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) declared in 2015. The SDGs' target 5.3 addresses this cultural practice and aims to eliminate it by 2030.

The Government of India has taken a progressive step in this direction by introducing the Prohibition of Child Marriage Amendment Bill, 2021 to ensure gender equality in marriage age. Since most of the child marriages involve girls, the Bill suggests an increase in the marriageable age for women from 18 to 21 years, which makes the minimum age of marriage for both the genders 21 years.

Historical Background of Child Marriage Act

During the British period in 1929, child marriage was outlawed for the first time through the implementation of the Child Marriage Restraint Act. This act, also called as the Sarda Act, defined the minimum age of marriage as 18 years for males and 14 for females. In the year 1949, after attaining independence, the minimum age of marriage for females was increased to 15. Again, in the year 1978, it was increased to 18 for females and 21 for males. The act also prescribed punishment for parents, guardians, for the person performing marriage ceremony and also for the male between the age of 18-21 years marrying a female under 18 years of age. A writ petition was filed at the Supreme Court by the Forum of Fact-Finding Documentation and Advocacy to address certain loopholes in the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. As a result, Government of India brought the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) in 2006. Although, this act did not make any changes in the age of marriage of male and female, but it brought some significant amendments in it to protect the girls from child marriage. It focused on prevention and prohibition of child marriage, rather than restraining it. One of the major changes brought by this new law was providing option to the minor boy and the girl of voiding their marriage upto two years after reaching adulthood. Moreover, in certain circumstances, marriage of minors can be null and void before they reach adulthood.

In spite of these legal provisions against child marriage, this practice could not be completely abolished. Keeping in view an urgent need to deal with this social practice and to bring in reforms the Prohibition of Child Marriage Amendment Bill, 2021 has been introduced in the Lok Sabha. This bill is based on the principle of equality of genders enshrined in the Indian Constitution to protect

physical, mental and reproductive health and wellbeing of women.

Status of Child Marriages in India

Report of the United Nations Children's Fund, 2019 says that India is home to over 223 million child brides and every third child bride of the world lives in India. The report further says that by 2030, up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of child marriage, as this risk has increased due to Covid-19. The report also mentions that out of the country's 223 million child brides, 102 million were married before turning 15 and over half of these child brides live in five states of the country i.e. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.

The health survey conducted in India reveals dismal picture of child marriages. It says that every fourth woman surveyed in the age group of 20 to 24 was married before she attained legal age of marriage, although this survey shows a drop in the overall rate of child marriages. It has declined from 26.8 per cent in the National Family Health Survey 4 (NFHS, 2015-16) to 23.3 per cent in NFHS 5 (2020). According to NFHS 5, 27 percent girls in rural India are married before 18 while in urban India, underage marriage accounted for 14.7 per cent of marriages. The data further shows that 6.8 per cent of females aged between 15 to 19 years were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey. This percentage was again higher in rural area with 7.9 per cent of women as compared to urban percentage of 3.8.

Review of Literature

Srinivasan et.al. (2015) conducted a study in two districts of Rajasthan with similar socio-demographic characteristics to find out the prevalence of child marriage. Unmarried and married girls, parents and parents-in-law of girls, influential adults in the community and officials from relevant government departments participated in the survey. The study found individual socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents like place of residence, education, household wealth, religion and caste as important factors in determining the marriage age of females. The study also established that there was greater tendency towards child marriage among rural women, irrespective of educational and wealth differences between rural and urban women, which suggested that marriage practices in rural areas are influenced strongly by traditional values.

The study by Mohan and Dash (2016) found that youth's decision about marriage is influenced by community and culture. 54.6% respondents (56.1% male and 53.5% female) believed that child marriages may not be considered as a celebration rather it kills the childhood, as well as destroys adulthood. On the other hand, 33.9% of the respondents supported child marriage as it was considered as a community practice.

Based on primary and secondary sources findings of the study conducted by Lal (2015) suggested that majority of girls who were married below 18 years were belonging to families below poverty line. Nearly 80 percent girls amongst these were suffering from any health issue or domestic violence. Further, many of the girls who were married before 18 years were likely to suffer with complications related to pregnancy and delivery of the child. The study also revealed that the girls who were married before 15 years were five times more likely to die during childbirth than women in their 20's. He concluded that child brides often show feeling of hopelessness, helplessness and severe depression as signs of post-traumatic stress due to sexual abuse in their marital relationship.

Santhya (2019) in her study based on group discussions found that most of the young girls preferred to marry at the age of 18 years or later. Some of the respondents believed that girls should marry when they are 24–25 years old after completing their studies. Girls narrated a range of reasons for preferring to delay marriage, including developmental, health and legal factors. One reason which remained common in all the group discussions was the constraint that marriage imposes on girls' pursuit of schooling.

Research Methodology

Objective

The objective of the study was to have an understanding of the perceptions of youth towards government's move to increase the age of marriage of girls.

Research Design

The exploratory research design was applied for the study. The study was both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

Sample

2. Awareness about the Bill

Random sampling method was used in the study. The sample of the study included male and female undergraduate, postgraduate students and research scholars of different teaching departments of Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (Haryana). The age of these students ranged from 16-40 years. The data was collected from a total of 1270 students - 323 male and 947 females.

Tool, Data Collection and Analysis

A semi structured questionnaire was designed to collect information through an online survey. The questions included personal background, opinion regarding the bill and its positive and negative consequences etc. The questionnaire was shared online through Google Form among various class groups of students of different teaching departments of Kurukshetra University. The data was analyzed by calculating percentages.

Findings

The survey found an overwhelming response for the government's initiative across the social strata in Haryana youth.

1. Personal Profile of Respondents

The findings revealed that among the total respondents, 55 percent were below the age of 20 years. Among male respondents, below 20 years and 21-25 years age group categories constituted 46.1 percent respondents each, while among female respondents, 58 percent were below 20 years and 37 percent of them were between 21-25 years of age. More than half of the male (58.8%) and female (55.7%) respondents belonged to rural background and 28.8 percent male and 33.5% female respondents were from urban background. The results also indicated that general caste constituted the major category (48.2%) of respondents followed by backward caste (32.8%) and scheduled caste category (19.0).

Further, agriculture was the main occupation of 25 percent of respondent's fathers followed by government job (16.5%) and laborer (16.4), while 86 percent of the respondents' mothers were housewives. It was also found that 64% of the respondents' annual family income was below 2.5 lac rupees.

Table 1: Awareness about the Bill

Category	Awareness (%)		
	Yes	No	Not Sure
Gender			
Male	311 (96.3)	9 (2.78)	3 (0.92)
Female	902 (95.25)	28 (2.95)	17 (1.80)
Area of Residence			
Rural	690 (96.10)	16 (2.23)	12 (1.67)
Urban	392 (95.37)	16 (3.89)	3 (0.73)
Semi Urban	133 (94.3)	5 (3.5)	3 (2.2)
Caste			
General	592 (96.7)	16 (2.6)	4 (0.7)
Backward	399 (96.0)	10 (2.4)	7 (1.6)
Scheduled Caste	224 (92.6)	11 (4.5)	7 (2.9)

When the respondents were questioned about their awareness regarding the Bill, it was found that almost all the respondents were familiar with it (96.3% male and 95.25% female). If we look at

the data area and category wise, it is clear that there were only a few respondents who were not aware about or not sure of introduction of this Bill by the government.

3. Perception towards the Bill

Table 2: How much do you agree with the Bill

Category	Agree/Disagree with the Bill				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Gender					
Male	56.7	29.7	7.4	2.5	3.7
Female	76.14	17.40	5.20	0.84	0.42
Area of Residence					
Rural	70.0	23.0	5.0	1.2	0.8
Urban	72.3	17.8	6.3	1.5	2.1
Semi Urban	74.5	16.3	7.8	0.7	0.7
Caste					
General	75.0	16.8	5.9	0.9	1.4
Backward	60.5	24.6	4.3	0.2	1.4
Scheduled Caste	64.9	23.1	7.9	3.7	0.4

The perception of respondents towards this bill was assessed on a five-point scale which revealed that a larger number of female respondents (76.14) as compared to male (56.75) were strongly agree, while 29.7 percent male and 17.40 percent female students were agree with this bill. When the age of the respondents was taken into account, it showed that majority of respondents who were strongly agree with the bill were below the age of 25 years (41.9 percent respondents were in the age group of 21-25 years and 28.6 percent were between 17-20 years of age).

Furthermore, 70 percent rural, 72.3 percent urban and 74.5 percent semi urban students were strongly agreed with this bill. When the caste of respondents was considered for calculating their response, it indicated that 75 percent respondents from general category, 69.5 percent from backward class and 64.9 percent from scheduled caste category were strongly agree with this decision of the government.

Table 3: The amendment will be able to curb child marriages

Category	Amendment will curb child marriages (%)	
	Yes	No
Gender		
Male	83.0	17.0
Female	82.5	17.5
Area of Residence		
Rural	82.0	18.0
Urban	81.0	19.0
Semi Urban	89.0	11.0
Caste		
General	83.0	17.0
Backward	86.0	14.0
Scheduled Caste	76.0	24.0
Total	82.5	17.5

On question whether this amendment would be able to curb child marriages, about 83 percent respondents expected the same. Out of these, 82.5 percent female and 83 percent male respondents felt that this law would be helpful in stopping this social evil. Similarly, among all the caste

categories and type of residences, vast majority of respondents looked forward to this bill in decreasing the number of child marriages in India. The table also reflects the fact that 24 percent scheduled caste respondents were not very much ambitious about this Bill.

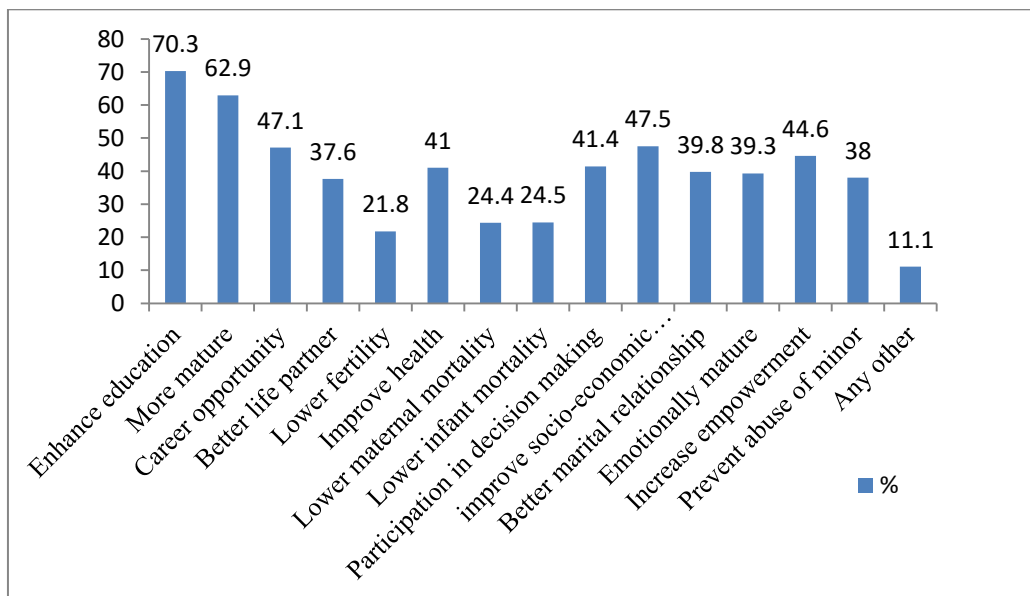


Fig. 1 Positive Outcomes of the Bill

The respondents were asked about the pros and cons of the bill. The findings of the survey revealed that majority of respondents (70.3 percent) were of the view that increase in age of marriage would enhance educational opportunities for girls, as 71.2 percent female and 69.2 percent male students held this view. Out of the total sample 62.9 percent students opined that it would provide girls chance

to become more mature to take up responsibilities of the family and carry relationships followed by 47.5 percent who felt that this amendment would improve their social and economic status, open up several career opportunities for girls (47.1 percent), increase empowerment (44.6 percent), increase participation of women in decision making (41.4

percent) and improve health and nutritional status

of girls (41. percent).

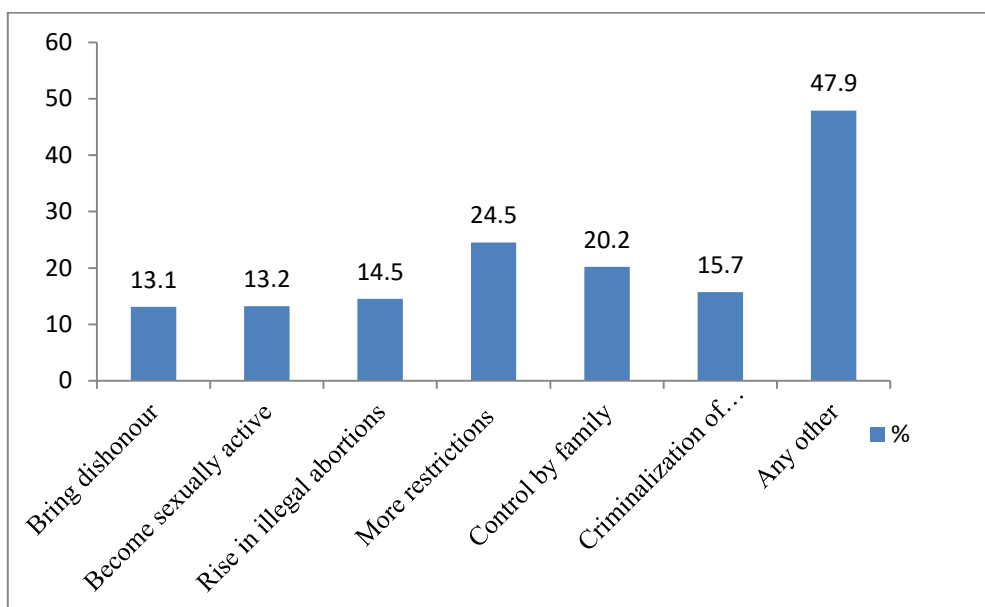


Fig. 2 Negative Outcomes of the Bill

On the other hand, students also cited cons of the bill as 24.5 percent of them out of the total sample opined that due to the delay in marriage more restrictions would be put upon girls’ mobility and freedom. Among the students holding this view 15 percent were male and 9.5 percent female. Other negative consequences shared by the students were: it would lead to more control of family over girls (20.2 percent) followed by criminalization of self-choice marriages of young adults (15.7 percent).

Child marriage is a practice that violates basic rights and prevents women from developing capabilities, developing social relationships and participating in civic life. Early pregnancy as a result of child marriage becomes the major cause of poor maternal and child health. The proposed equality in marriage age might foster empowerment of women through enhancing their participation in decision making and maintaining good health.

While citing their opinion on the issue of child marriage most of the students welcomed this step and considered it a positive effort towards reform in child marriage. One of them says, “Increase in legal age of marriage for women will provide them with more educational and employment opportunities, while giving them more time to fulfill their dreams and for aspiring their future goals.”

One respondent viewed, “The age of marriage should be totally dependent on mental maturity of the girl not on the physical age.”

Another says, “This amendment will bring silver lining in girls’ life.”

The respondents felt that delay in marriage would provide girls ample time to become more mature to understand family and more confident to face the odds of the world. There are a number of girls married in their teens suffering from mental health issues due to emotional immaturity they showed in handling familial issues. They also stated that adolescent girls are more likely to experience domestic violence when they are married early as opposed to women who are married at an older age. A study conducted in India by the International Center for Research on Women (2020) substantiated that child brides below 18 years of age are twice as likely to be beaten, slapped or threatened by their husbands and three times more likely to experience sexual violence. These brides often show feeling of helplessness and depression as a result of sexual abuse.

The respondents acknowledged the fact that the risk of maternal mortality and infant mortality is reduced on girls marrying at a later age. The study conducted by Mayor (2004) posits that girls who marry early were not having sufficient information about reproductive issues. Her results also proved

that maternal mortality due to child marriages was the leading cause of mortality among married girls between 15 and 19 years of age. Infants born to mothers under the age of 18 were 60 percent more likely to die in their first year than to mothers over the age of 19.

One of the respondents opined that the objective behind increasing legal age of marriage would be achieved when the parents would allow their daughters to succeed with their educational pursuits and taking up a career. If the parents forced their daughters to drop their studies for any reason, its objective would be failed. One respondent says, "Mere creating legal provision is not sufficient, unless implemented effectively".

Besides strict enforcement of the law, the government should make provisions for better educational opportunities, more employment avenues, better health care facilities, and better safety provisions for girls. Sex education should be promoted at schools, inter-caste marriages should be encouraged, more awareness should be spread in rural areas for overcoming orthodox mindset about the girl child and dishonor associated with choice marriage, along with age of marriage of boys should be increased to 23: were some of the other suggestions received during the survey.

Conclusion

Child marriages are rampant in India and every third child bride of the world lives in India. Marriage of a girl at a tender age cuts away her educational opportunities and hampers her overall development. It denies her from becoming a productive member of the family and society. Child marriage not only has a strong correlation with personal growth and financial independence but is also associated with good health of a woman and the infant. More than half of the women in India enter pregnancy with iron deficiency which is exacerbated by child marriage. Early pregnancy coupled with iron deficiency leads to poor maternal and infant health and becomes major cause of maternal and infant mortality. Increasing the age of marriage may lead to positive impact upon personal, educational, financial and health status of women. It may provide girls chance to increase the number of years in schools and colleges by reducing the dropout rate, allow them to enjoy their independence, becoming more aware about their rights and reproductive health and becoming more

empowered. Empowerment of women creates ripple effect on society, as empowered woman is able to empower her children and family.

Empowerment includes having control over one's own life and participating in decision making process at all levels. A woman who gets married at a matured age is likely to have emotional maturity in dealing with day-to-day issues related to marital relationships and may be able to prove herself as an equal and active member of the family. The desired outcome of the bill can be achieved only if implemented properly and girls of the country are able to get increased access to education and enabling environment by minimizing the reasons associated with their dropout from schools, especially in the rural areas. However, a few respondents viewed that the Bill would criminalize the consensual relationship, take away young women's right to choice and delay in marriage may also lead to more control over girls' freedom of mobility as it may increase the fear of bringing dishonor or disgrace to the family but the study suggested more positive outcomes of the delay in marriage of girls rather than negative consequences.

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