

Child marriage: Nothing to celebrate

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We celebrated the fifth anniversary of the historic UN resolution on ending child marriage yesterday. Hence, the time is ripe to assess how far India has succeeded in its goal of reducing the number of child brides. The UN resolution, which came into effect in 2015, is fundamental to building strong international standards that recognise child marriage for what it is: A violation of fundamental human rights. According to a UNICEF report released in 2014, titled *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*, child marriage is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, with South Asia accounting for 42 per cent of all child brides worldwide. Of these, one in three is found in India, yet the nation was not among the 116 countries that supported the UN Resolution. In fact, barring Afghanistan and the Maldives, other South Asian nations, too, ostensibly failed to ratify the resolution, despite persistently battling the challenge of child marriage and its concomitant adverse impacts. A peek into history throws up another ironical picture.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, spanning the mid-16th to early 17th centuries in England, were some of the most conservative periods in history, replete with tales of docile women and chauvinistic men. Yet early marriages were rare. Although the minimum legal marriageable age was 12 years for girls and 14 for boys, records reveal that the mean marriage ages ranged from 25 for women to 27 for men.

Historians assert that in medieval England, the primary reason for late marriage among labourers and the middle class was financial. Young couples could barely afford a roof over their heads and had to keep their romantic impulses in check till their earnings reached subsistence level, well into their mid-20s.

In 20th and 21st century India, poverty is again the overarching reason for the anomaly in conjugal well-being, but its outcome is the exact opposite. In a 2011 research paper titled *Delaying Marriage for Girls in India: A Formative Research to Design Interventions for Changing Norms*, UNICEF found that poverty in Rajasthan was the biggest reason for fathers pushing their daughters into an early marriage.

These data are ratified by the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in collaboration with the University of Maryland, USA, in 2004-05 and 2011-12. The IHDS includes a household module as well as a module administered to 33,510 married women aged 15–49 years. A ray of hope offered by data from the UN and other agencies points to the declining rate of child marriages in India between 1991-2011. The IHDS, too, found that an increasing proportion of women were delaying marriage, but the mean age of marriage for women in the country continues to remain low. As of the second wave of IHDS released in 2011-12, almost 41 per cent of the women in the age group of 15-32 years were married between 16 and 18 years of age.

An analysis of data from the National Family Health Survey, (NFHS-I) along with IHDS-II, indicates that the percentage of women in the 20–24 age group, who were married before 18, declined from 56.8 per cent in 1992–93 (NFHS-I) to 36.2 per cent in 2011–12 (IHDS II).

However, the number of child marriages and its prevalence among girls remains very high even in recent times. According to the 2011 census, 7.4 million people were married before the age of 18 years, 88 per cent of whom were girls. Uttar Pradesh (UP), Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Bihar, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, together contributed to 70 per cent of child marriages in the country, with four districts of Rajasthan — Bhilwara, Chittorgarh, Tonk, and Ajmer — and Lalitpur from UP, being “hotspots” for the occurrence of child marriages in India.

Says an elderly resident of Tonk, himself married at the age of five, “There are a lot of child marriages in our community due to poverty and poor literacy. My wife came to stay with me when I was 15 and she was just 12.” Citing his personal experience, he avers that child marriage is antithetical to marital happiness and health, as it puts a major burden of responsibilities on the boy and entails numerous health problems for the girl. Child marriage has been found to have negative consequences on the young bride’s health, economic opportunities and her children’s health. Early marriage negatively affects the bride’s autonomy over contraceptive use, resulting in a higher likelihood of early and high-risk pregnancies. It also put her at risk of sexually transmitted infections and intimate partner violence. Child marriage also makes young girls more vulnerable because it leads to lower education attainment and diminished opportunities to develop social networks. Another UNICEF report of 2005, *Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice*, points out that at 67 per cent, India has the highest levels of domestic violence among women married by the age of 18. What does the future hold for these girls-women in a society confronted with unprecedented social and economic challenges and a rapidly transforming anthropological and demographic landscape?

According to Heather Hamilton, Global Coordinator of Girls Not Brides, a global partnership of more than 1,300 civil society organisations from over 100 countries, committed to ending child marriage, “The UN resolution situates child marriage firmly within the post-2015 development agenda, recognising the need to end child, early and forced marriage.”

Alex George, Senior Consultant for Child Rights, at Child Rights Focus advocates effective policy enforcement and stronger legal actions. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, which makes it illegal for girls to marry before the age of 18 and for boys under 21 years, also must be implemented stringently.

Actions, however, speak louder than words. A small village in Tonk has been taking the lead in monitoring child marriage and leading discussions with other community members on its damaging effects.

Last year, the village was declared child bride-free under the UNICEF’s Laadli Samman (Honour your daughters) campaign. A small step but with a gigantic portent for girls to thrive and live their dreams before being shackled in premature matrimony.

(The writer is Editor at NCAER. Views expressed are personal.)