



Iris Group

CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE: A Political Economy Analysis of India

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In 2020-21, Iris Group conducted a series of gender-intentional political economy analyses (PEA) on the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in eight countries. This brief is a summary of the full PEA report on CEFM in India.

INTRODUCTION

India has been one of the fastest growing G20 economies since 2014 and has launched social protection and welfare policies to address social challenges.¹ Bihar and Uttar Pradesh – two of India’s most populous states and the focus of this analysis – have lower educational attainment, literacy, and school transition outcomes than the national average.² India has the highest global burden of girl child marriage because of its large population, but the rate of women aged 20-24 years who were married before the age of 18 has declined from 47% to 27% over the past decade.³ This is possibly due to increased access to education and decreased poverty.⁴ Child marriage prevalence is high in Bihar (42.5%) and Uttar Pradesh (20%), though both states report significant reductions.³ To eliminate child marriage by 2030, India needs to speed its rate of reduction four-fold nationally, seven-fold in Bihar, and two-fold in Uttar Pradesh.⁵

The political economy analysis of CEFM in India, focused on Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, consisted of a desk review and key informant interviews, with findings within the following four pillars of analysis:

- **Foundational Factors:** Embedded structures that are difficult or impossible to change, such as geography, class, ethnicity, gender inequality
- **Rules of the Game:** Laws, international commitments, policies, and social norms
- **Here and Now:** Current events and circumstances
- **Dynamics:** Interplay among the other pillars

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FINDINGS

Foundational Factors

- Poverty and gender inequality drive child marriage in India, with higher prevalence in lower economic quintiles (37-46%).⁵ Historical and institutionalized patriarchy drives down the perceived value of girl children.⁶
- Economic exclusion, lack of education, and cultural practices affect child marriage prevalence within socially vulnerable caste and tribal groups by limiting girls' opportunities.⁷
- There are large variations in child marriage prevalence rates between and within states.⁴ Prevalence rates are higher among girls in rural areas (31.5%) than urban (17.5%).³
- Child marriage in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh is heavily concentrated in rural areas and the lowest economic tercile.³

Rules of the Game

- Marriage is illegal under the age of 18 for girls/ woman and 21 for boys/ men. Participants can void a marriage through The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) if they wish to.^{8,9}
- The 2012 Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act increased the age of sexual consent from 16 to 18, criminalizing all sexual activity below that age⁹ and requiring reporting by health providers.
- Laws around marriage and sexuality – including ones around dowry, which is illegal – are implemented unevenly and used punitively, especially against adolescents who elope.⁹
- Social and gender norms sustain the practice of child marriage by characterizing girls as an economic burden,⁶ linking family honor to girls' sexual purity,¹⁰ and limiting their educational/ career aspirations due to domestic obligations. Some norms and practices are region-specific.
- Decision-makers who promote the practice do not value participants' consent to marry. Consensual relationships prior to marriage and elopement are often met with backlash.

Here and Now

- A national government task force is examining raising age of marriage for girls to 21,¹¹ despite broad civil society opposition.
- National and state governments have implemented large schemes to combat child marriage, with some impact on issue.
- India has an active civil society working on combatting child marriage, including grassroots women's groups with feminist approaches.
- Government and civil society organizations (CSOs) seem to be more visible than international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) on combatting child marriage.
- Large-scale child marriage programs focus on cash transfers or education, while small-scale programs tend to be multisectoral.
- COVID-19 lockdowns have suspended programs, created economic insecurity, and are likely to cause girls to drop out of school.

Dynamics

- **Progress:**
 - Advocacy efforts have built coalitions to work across women and youth rights organizations.
 - Large-scale schemes are used to address child marriage alongside smaller approaches which focus on gender and empowerment.
 - Research institutions collect district-level data about where child marriage is still occurring.
- **Obstacles:**
 - The national government is not responsive to civil society input and emphasizes legal age as a solution over girls' and women's agency.
 - It is difficult to balance large scale efforts with extensive reach with localized programs that are adaptable and integrate norms change.
 - More research is needed to understand why some communities' norms supporting child marriage have persisted in the face of economic improvements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Case for Investment

- **Success in India makes an impact on global prevalence.** Because India includes the highest burden, with 15,648,000 of the world's child marriages, success here can have a tremendous impact.
- **COVID-19 and the potential increase in age of marriage create an urgency to build the social, educational, and economic infrastructure to support girls and young women with a gender and rights lens.**
- **Donors can build on existing investments in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for an integrated approach to CEFM.** Experience and credibility in family planning, women's economic empowerment, and nutrition can build a cohesive, integrated approach to CEFM within a gender equality framework.

2. Key Points of Leverage on CEFM

- **Civil society, including community-based organizations, provide an authentically Indian response.** India's robust and active civil society is a tremendously important tool in addressing CEFM.
- **Political support for reducing child marriage in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh can contribute to scaled**

government programs with a gender lens.

Examining which state and local policies are and are not working for girls and young women, and what is needed to improve them, are the next steps.

- **Current synergy between women's groups and youth groups can be leveraged for ongoing coordination of advocacy strategies.** Girls' leadership and voices should be centered as these networks develop.

3. Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **India should better coordinate and target research to understand communities where child marriage decreases are lagging behind economic development.** At both the state and national level, better coordination and indexing of existing and future data can help stakeholders develop a common understanding of what it takes to reduce child marriage.
- **Programs should test strategies to integrate gender norms change into anti-poverty approaches.** Investing in gender equality can insulate girls from the impacts that economic crises and natural disasters currently have on child marriage rates.
- **Building on the rich history of women's collectives can yield results for girls.** Girls' collectives can help empower them and position them to help India recover from COVID-19.

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