

India's Fight Against Child Marriage is Ongoing and Complex

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By Bhawna Ahuja



Child marriage is a prevalent and persistent problem in India, despite the country's efforts to curb the practice. The harmful consequences of child marriage, including the denial of education, the risk of domestic violence, and the likelihood of poor health outcomes, have long been recognized by advocates and policymakers.

According to the latest **National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) data**, the percentage of child marriages in India declined from 47.4% in 2005-06 to 26.8% in 2015-16, representing a drop of 21 percentage points over the decade. Additionally, over the past five years, the percentage has decreased further by 3.5%, reaching 23.3% in 2020-21.

Yet, despite the country's strong laws and policies to end such practices, it remains widespread, particularly among girls from poor and marginalized communities. While referring to the National Crime Records Bureau's Crime in India (CII) report for 2021, **more than 1000 cases of child marriage** were registered under the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006**, for the first time in 2021. While this is more than a 9-

fold increase compared to 2011, the actual prevalence of child marriages is much higher, as evident from the NFHS-5 data.

India's policies to fight child marriage have been aimed at prevention and protection. The country's laws prohibit the practice of child marriage and provide substantial penalties for those who participate in such marriages or fail to report them. Additionally, the government has launched several initiatives to raise awareness about the dangers of child marriage and promote alternative pathways for girls, such as education and vocational training.

Significant Initiatives

One of the most significant initiatives in India's fight against child marriage was the implementation of the **PCMA in 2006**. The PCMA sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 for girls and 21 for boys. Along with substantial penalties, the law also provides for the annulment of such marriages and the rehabilitation of affected children. Despite the strength of the PCMA, enforcement remains a significant challenge. Child marriages are often performed in secret and remote areas, making them difficult to detect and prosecute. Furthermore, the social stigma attached to reporting such marriages and the fear of retaliation by those who arrange them discourage many girls and their families from reporting them.

In addition to legal measures, the Indian government has also launched several initiatives to prevent child marriage through education and empowerment.

Child Protection Act, 2005: The Child Protection Act protects and rehabilitates children affected by child marriage, trafficking, and other forms of exploitation.

Right to Education Act, 2009: The Right to Education Act guarantees the right to education for all children between the ages of 6 and 14. This is important in the fight against child marriage, as education is critical in empowering girls and reducing their vulnerability to early marriage.

National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001: The NPEW provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the issue of child marriage in India and promoting the empowerment of girls and women.

National Commission for Women (NCW), 1992: The NCW is a statutory body that works to promote the rights and welfare of women in India, including preventing child marriage.

National Plan of Action for Children, 2005: The NPAC provides a framework for addressing the issue of child marriage in India and protecting children's rights.

Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), 2009: The ICPS provides a comprehensive framework for protecting children affected by child marriage, trafficking, and other forms of exploitation.

In addition, the government has also launched several awareness campaigns to educate communities about the dangers of child marriage and the importance of girls' education and empowerment.

Challenges

Despite these efforts, it remains a widespread and persistent problem in India. According to the United Nations, India has the highest number of child brides globally, with nearly one in three girls married before 18. The problem is particularly prevalent among girls from marginalized communities, such as Dalits and tribals, who face significant social, economic, and cultural barriers to accessing education and alternatives to marriage.

There are several reasons why child marriage remains a persistent problem in India, despite the country's strong laws and policies. One of the main reasons is poverty, which drives families to marry off their daughters early to reduce their financial burden. In addition, deep-rooted cultural and social norms that view marriage as a duty and an indicator of social status also contribute to the persistence of child marriage. Furthermore, the lack of access to education and alternative pathways for girls, particularly in rural and remote areas, makes it difficult for them to resist the pressures to enter into early marriages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, India's fight against child marriage is ongoing and complex but has made some progress in recent years. The country has implemented stringent laws and policies to prevent child marriage and protect affected children, but enforcement remains a significant challenge. To effectively address the problem of child marriage in India, it is essential to take a multi-pronged approach that combines legal measures with education and empowerment initiatives, as well as increased enforcement efforts. Only by taking a comprehensive and sustained approach can India hope to end the harmful practice of

child marriage and create a better future for its girls and women. It will require the collective efforts of the government, civil society, and communities to bring about real and lasting change.

About the Author:

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