ENDLING CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA

India carries the burden of the largest number of child brides in the world - one third of the global total.\(^1\) In the next five years, 8 million girls are at risk of getting married, and half of these girls are at risk of becoming pregnant within a year after they get married. Every year, at least 1.5 million girls get married in India.

BACKGROUND

Child marriage is defined as a union where either one or both parties are under the legal age of marriage i.e. 18 years for women and 21 for men, as per the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006. The consequences of child marriage have a dramatic impact on girls in comparison to boys. Not only does it increase the incidence of teenage pregnancies, putting young mothers and their child’s lives at risk, but also limits development opportunities in life, increases the risks of violence and abuse, limits opportunities for informed choices and fulfilling aspirations. This is a violation of children’s right to education, protection and development.

In the past ten years, child marriage has sharply decreased, from 47 to 27 per cent.\(^2\) This may be the result of multiple factors such as increased literacy of mothers, girls’ better access to education, strong legislation and migration from rural areas to urban centres. However, progress has been unequal across states and marriage also

\(^2\)Source: National Family Health Survey, 2015-16, Census 2011
increases the vulnerability of children, especially girls to drop-out of school education, lack of financial independence, domestic violence, agency and other protection issues.

**There are a combination of factors that contribute to the high incidence of child marriage in India:**

a) Poverty, high wedding costs, and other economic considerations  
b) Gender norms and prescriptions, and lack of girl's agency  
c) Widely accepted social norms  
d) Limited access to schooling, especially at secondary level  
e) Families' concerns over safety and security of adolescent girls  
f) Inadequate law enforcement

**ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IS A SMART ECONOMIC INVESTMENT**

Investing in ending child marriage can be critical in addressing multiple deprivations of girls through the life-cycle. It is a window of opportunity for addressing deep-rooted gender inequity, intergenerational poverty and transition from school to work. Eliminating child marriage, addressing early child birth, investing in health, education and skills building for work, of adolescent girls and boys is beneficial for the Indian economy.

Girls who marry young do not receive the educational and economic opportunities that help lift them out of poverty and which are necessary to build a sustainable and prosperous future for their communities and countries. **Educated and healthy women are more productive thereby contributing to greater national productivity and higher Gross Domestic Product.** They spend more money on food, housing, education and income-generating activities, all of which reduce poverty levels and promote sustainable development. As both a driver and consequence of poor educational attainment, it is crucial to address child marriage to improve girls' education.

Preventing child marriage is an effective entry point to address broader issues such as adolescents' aspirations and opportunities in life, breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and ensuring the roles of young people as agents of change.

**Boys and men have to be included in this effort: promoting positive masculinities, breaking gender stereotypes to create opportunities for men to foster change in social and cultural norms.**

**POLICY FRAMEWORK**

India is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, which mentions elimination of child marriage. However, India is not a signatory to the UN Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1962)." Irrespective of the ambiguity in its commitment to the international community, India has adopted laws to declare the practice illegal, and implemented a number of schemes to prevent child marriage:

a) Eleventh Five-Year Plan 2007-2012 calls for the 'compulsory registration of marriages and verification of age at the time of marriage'
Despite the laws, and designated roles of officials, enforcement has been a challenge and the number of cases reported remain low. The 2014 Compendium of Crime in India lists just 280 cases of Child Marriage (National Crime Records Bureau). There is need to accelerate efforts to end child marriage in the country taking evidence from substantial body of research on factors that contribute to the prevalence, and through strong implementation of policies and programmes.

**UNICEF'S APPROACH TO ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE**

UNICEF, in collaboration with the Government of India is accelerating interventions for adolescent empowerment and preventing child marriage in India, through five major strategies:

1. **Social movement against ending child marriage** - Political commitment, constituency building with influencers and community mobilization at state and district level. Families are aware of benefits of investing in adolescent girls and ending child marriage

2. **Strengthening of systems** - State planning, coordination, monitoring and implementation at district level. Relevant government systems deliver quality and cost-effective services to meet the needs of adolescent girls and boys

3. **Continuum of investments in education** - Professional skills and employment (life skills - social, self, learning and employability) for adolescent girls and boys. They are supported to enrol and remain in formal and non-formal education, including through the transition from primary to secondary education

4. **Social Protection Plus** - Link with education, skills, employment and social and behaviour change

5. **Adolescent girls and boys as agents of change** - Improve self-efficacy, connect with Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and District Administration; amplify their voice through digital and other platforms
WHAT CAN PARLIAMENTARIANS DO?

As leaders, you can be the most visible champions of the issue in your constituencies. You can champion the issue on the floor of the Parliament, raise questions in the zero hour and raise private members’ bills.

AS GOVERNMENT DUTY BEARERS

i. You can **organize an event or public meeting on prevention of child marriage** in Parliament/in your states and invite civil society representatives, relevant UN experts, youth/adolescents, donor, government representatives, private sector/foundations, researchers, academics to attend

ii. You can **ensure that the 24*7 Childline (1098) is functional** and registers complaints from across your constituency and a robust mechanism to track the progress of all registered complaints

iii. You can **visit and review functioning of government institutions** for child protection in your constituencies

AS COMMUNITY INFLUENCERS

i. You can **listen to the voices of children, and reach the hardest to reach.** You can strengthen or establish permanent institutionalised mechanisms involving a group of children on a regular basis such as a youth advisory board, adolescent groups, focus groups, and children’s management committees

ii. You can **increase investment on adolescent girls' and boys' transition to secondary school education and access to 21st century skills for future work.** This can be done through establishment of functional and accessible Training/Vocational Centres to equip young people with relevant skills for work

iii. You can **incentivize change**, for example through cash transfers, ensure that adolescent girls and boys are able to participate in GPDP process and other community platforms to raise their concerns

iv. You can **work with religious and traditional leaders** both to raise awareness of the law and legal age of marriage, as well as to increase awareness about risks of child marriage and alternatives for girls

v. You can be a **peer champion for other parliamentarians**, to replicate a model of child marriage free constituencies

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*This means it has not committed itself to the provisions of marriage only by clearly expressed consent of both parties, who have to be of an age competent to give legal consent.*

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