



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH, IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY

ISSN: 2454-132X

Impact Factor: 6.078

(Volume 10, Issue 4 - V10I4-1240)

Available online at: <https://www.ijariit.com>

Challenging Child Marriage: The Role of Female Participation in Small-Scale Industries and Comprehensive Socio-Economic Policies

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Abstract

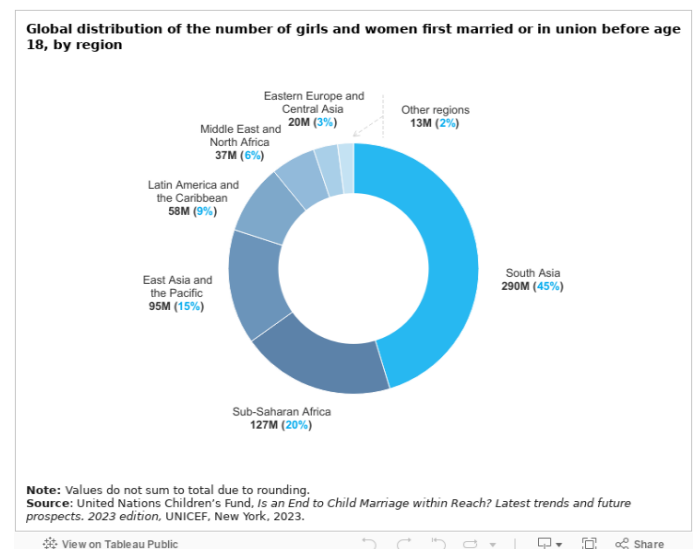
This research addresses the persistent issue of child marriage, focusing on its prevalence in regions like Rajasthan, India, where 35% of girls are married before the age of 18. The practice is driven not only by poverty and lack of education but also by a deeply ingrained "packaged mentality" that perceives daughters as burdens. Despite various legal efforts to combat child marriage, this mindset continues to hinder progress. The study explores the transformative potential of involving women in small-scale industries, where their participation can challenge traditional gender roles and shift societal perceptions. The research proposes policies to promote female participation in businesses, alongside incentives for families to invest in their daughters' education. Additionally, addressing menstrual health by providing free or low-cost products in schools is identified as crucial for keeping girls in education. These comprehensive strategies aim to reduce child marriage and promote gender equality by valuing girls for their potential rather than as burdens.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Packaged Mentality, Gender Equality, Small-Scale Industries, Female Participation, Menstrual Health.

Introduction

Every year, around 12 million young girls are married off, entering a phase of life where, instead of choosing the color of a doll, their parents are choosing their wedding dress.

This practice of child marriage is prevalent not only in India but also in the Middle East, the Caribbean, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. In Rajasthan, where 35% of girls are married before the age of 18, this practice robs them of their future and hinders the progress of the entire country. Parents often marry off their daughters in the hope of financial security or because they perceive a girl child as a burden. This extreme discrimination against half the population harms not only the family but also the economy. Child marriage often leads to teenage pregnancies, which can result in severe health consequences for both the mother and the child. The young bride is vulnerable not only to physical harm but also to psychological trauma, which can be life-threatening.



1. Understanding the Persistence of Child Marriage: The Influence of "Packaged Mentality"

Child marriage remains a deeply rooted practice in many parts of the world, particularly in regions like Rajasthan, India. This enduring tradition raises critical questions about the motivations behind it: Why do parents continue to marry off their daughters at such a young age? Is it merely a result of poverty or a lack of education? While these factors undoubtedly contribute to the prevalence of child marriage, the root cause often lies in a more profound, ingrained issue—the "packaged mentality." The "packaged mentality" refers to a set of beliefs, norms, and expectations that individuals absorb from their environment, much like a child learns to walk by observing those around them. This mentality isn't something people are inherently born with; rather, it is acquired through socialization and cultural reinforcement. In the context of child marriage, the idea that daughters are "Paraya Dhan" (someone else's wealth) not only objectifies women but also perpetuates the notion that daughters are a burden on their families, a burden that needs to be transferred through marriage.

2. Challenges in Eradicating the Packaged Mentality

Despite significant efforts by the government and numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to combat child marriage, the mindset driving this practice remains deeply rooted and resistant to change. Educational campaigns, legal interventions, and economic incentives have all been employed to discourage child marriage, but the "packaged mentality" continues to persist in many communities. This is because changing a mindset involves more than just altering external circumstances; it requires a fundamental shift in how people perceive and value women and girls in society.

3. Women in Small-Scale Industries: A Catalyst for Change

However, there is hope for change, particularly when women become involved in small-scale industries, especially within family-owned businesses. The involvement of women in business has the potential to challenge and transform traditional gender roles. Interviews with local business owners in Udaipur, Rajasthan, reveal an evolving perspective that underscores the value of women's participation in the family business. For instance, a jewelry shop owner shared that he relies more on his daughters for managing inventory and payments because of their patience and attention to detail—qualities he finds lacking in his sons. Similarly, a local tailor noted that his wife excels in bargaining and negotiation, further emphasizing the unique strengths women bring to the business world.

4. Challenging Traditional Gender Roles

These examples suggest that when women are actively engaged in family businesses, they gain respect and an equal standing within their families. Their involvement challenges the traditional gender roles that have long relegated women to domestic responsibilities, providing them with opportunities to showcase their talents and capabilities. This shift in perception not only benefits the women themselves but also strengthens the family business by leveraging the diverse skills and perspectives that women bring to the table.



5. Overcoming Challenges in Trust and Confidence

However, this shift towards greater female involvement in business is not without its challenges. Some locals still express hesitation when it comes to trusting their daughters or wives to handle business dealings, particularly with male counterparts. This hesitation stems from long-standing biases and doubts about women's abilities in the public sphere. Yet, there is also evidence that when women are involved on both sides of a business transaction, the process tends to be more streamlined and efficient. In fact, some business owners have come to prefer working with female suppliers because of the smoother transactions and the trust that develops through these interactions.

6. The Transformative Power of Women's Involvement in Business

The involvement of women in business not only empowers them economically but also has the potential to shift societal perceptions and dismantle the "packaged mentality." As more women demonstrate their value in the business world, they challenge the outdated notion of being a "burden" and instead become recognized as valuable assets to their families and communities. This transformation has far-reaching implications, as it can lead to a broader re-evaluation of women's roles in society, ultimately contributing to the reduction of practices like child marriage.

7. The Need for Effective Implementation of Anti-Child Marriage Laws

While the government has passed laws against child marriage, their implementation remains inconsistent and incomplete. Many communities find ways to circumvent these laws, often driven by the same "packaged mentality" that sees daughters as burdens. This highlights the need for more robust enforcement and complementary policies that address the underlying socio-economic and cultural factors contributing to child marriage.

8. Proposed Policy: Ensuring Women's Participation in Business

One potential policy to combat these issues is to mandate a minimum of 40% female participation in small-scale businesses.

By requiring that nearly half of the workforce in these businesses consists of women, the government can promote gender equality in the economic sphere.

This policy could be coupled with incentives for businesses that exceed this quota, such as tax breaks or access to government grants. The increased involvement of women in business not only empowers them economically but also challenges the traditional norms that perpetuate child marriage.

9. Mandatory Education and Awareness of Bodily Autonomy

Another critical policy would be to ensure that every child, regardless of gender, receives proper education until at least the age of 16. Education is a powerful tool in raising awareness about individual rights, including bodily autonomy. By keeping girls in school longer, they are less likely to be married off at a young age and more likely to understand their rights and opportunities. This educational mandate could be supported by strict penalties for non-compliance and targeted campaigns to shift public attitudes towards the importance of educating girls.

10. Incentives for Education: Encouraging Families to Invest in Their Daughters

To overcome the resistance some families may have towards sending their daughters to school, the government could offer attractive incentives. For example, families could be offered low-interest loans or reduced interest rates if their daughters graduate from high school. Additional incentives could include discounts on essential services like healthcare or relaxation on ration card limits. By tying these benefits directly to educational achievements, the government can create a powerful motivation for families to prioritize their daughters' education.



11. Addressing Menstrual Health: Removing Barriers to Education

Another crucial aspect of keeping girls in school is addressing menstrual health. Many girls drop out of school once they begin menstruating due to a lack of access to affordable menstrual products and inadequate facilities. Providing free or low-cost menstrual products in schools could significantly reduce dropout rates and ensure that girls remain in education.

This policy could be supported by health education programs that destigmatize menstruation and teach both boys and girls about menstrual health.

Conclusion: A Comprehensive Approach to Eradicating Child Marriage

The fight against child marriage requires a multifaceted approach that includes both legal enforcement and socio-economic interventions. By mandating women's participation in business, ensuring universal education until age 16, offering incentives for educational achievements, and addressing menstrual health, the government can create an environment where girls are valued for their potential rather than seen as burdens. These policies, combined with continued efforts to change societal attitudes, could significantly reduce the practice of child marriage and promote gender equality in India.

Acknowledgement

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