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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

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CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA- A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON ORIGIN, IMPLICATIONS AND LEGAL SAFEGUARDS.

AUTHORED BY - MAYUR ANAND¹ & VINAYAK²

Abstract

Child marriage is a major human rights issue in India that affects the lives of millions of children. Despite laws prohibiting child marriage, the practice persists due to deeply entrenched social norms and traditions. This paper examines the problem of child marriage in India, its causes, consequences, and potential solutions. Key factors perpetuating child marriage include poverty, lack of education, patriarchal social norms, inadequate law enforcement, political apathy, and customs like dowry. Child marriage disproportionately impacts girls and violates their Fundamental rights to health, education, equality, and childhood free of abuse. It can lead to early pregnancy, maternal mortality, trafficking, domestic violence, poverty, illiteracy, and powerlessness. While laws like the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 helped raise the minimum marriage age to 18 for girls and 21 for boys, enforcement remains weak. Comprehensive solutions require action on multiple fronts – legal reform, sensitization of law enforcement agencies, ensuring girls' education, socio-economic empowerment of women, robust implementation of welfare schemes, changing social attitudes, and active civil society intervention. With concerted efforts on these fronts, the practice can be eliminated within a generation.

Keywords- Child Marriage, Fundamental Rights, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act,2006.

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1. Introduction

Child marriage, defined as the marriage of a child below the age of 18 years, is widely prevalent in India and a major impediment to the country's development. According to UNICEF³, India has the largest number of child brides in the world accounting for about one-third of the global total. Over one-fourth of girls are married before 18 in India. While the legal age is 18 for girls and 21 for boys, millions of underage marriages still take place illegally. It is also a bigger issue among the girls as in the case of boys the cases amount to only 1/6 of the total cases among the girls. The issue is just about the morality of the case as child marriages affect the psychological and physiological health of the victims making them prone to contracting several severe ailments and illnesses that can prove life-threatening in most cases; which also brings up the discussion of the victims suffering from domestic violence, lack of basic human rights, economic/financial crisis, among a lot of other problems. Several adverse consequences are associated with child marriage - it violates children's basic rights, cuts short their childhood, puts their health and lives at risk, and traps them in poverty and powerlessness. Ending child marriage has therefore become a top policy priority for India. However, changing deep-rooted social norms around early marriage has proved challenging. This paper closely examines the practice of child marriage in India - its causes, consequences, legal framework, and possible solutions.

It is pertinent to make efforts to not just stop child marriages but to also stop the possibility of such cases from happening ever again and that would require strict laws and regulations that would ensure the safety of children under all circumstances from such atrocious acts. There have been multiple attempts at it too. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 and further amendments to the same in the later years have shown a sliver of hope for these children who were being victimized through inhuman acts of savagery.

2. Causes of Child Marriage:

Multiple interlinked factors underpin the persistence of child marriage in India. They are present as a part of a long-standing cultural drawback that seemingly has no place in the present society. These cultural practices were based on age-old rituals and superstitious beliefs that cannot be placed under

³ Child Marriage available at- <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage> (last visited on 24th December 2023)

any logical or reasonable umbrella of understanding. Neither can they be justified by any means as they fail to conform to any possible sense of social morality or principles. The. Key reasons include:

2.1 Poverty: Poor families see child marriage as a way to reduce expenses and ensure economic security. Marrying off daughters early is seen as one less mouth to feed.

2.2 Patriarchal norms: India is a predominantly patriarchal society where girls are viewed as economic burdens. Social orthodoxy mandates early marriage to avoid girls straying or eloping with boys from other castes/religions which is seen as dishonorable.

2.3 Social Norms, Gender Bias, and Their Impact: Regressive social norms and entrenched gender bias in India form major stumbling blocks inhibiting efforts against child marriage. Many rural communities still view girls as paraya dhan (someone else's wealth) who will eventually leave their natal homes. So, educating them or investing in their development seems pointless. Sons are preferred to carry forward the family name. Discrimination against girls starts from birth itself as evident in India's adverse child sex ratio of 920 girls per 1000 boys as per the 2011 census. Daughters are seen as burdens due to practices like dowry. Social norms dictate that girls must be married early before they attain sexual maturity to avoid premarital pregnancies and loss of family honor. The caste system too encourages child marriages to prevent inter-caste unions. Parents fear that girls may become sexually involved with boys from so-called "lower" castes if not married off early enough within their own caste.

Entrenched patriarchy mars women's status in society. Rural girls often suffer multiple disadvantages - they belong to oppressed castes, live in abject poverty, remain uneducated, stay uninformed about their legal rights, and face severe restrictions on their freedom and life choices. They have little say in decisions like marriage and childbearing which are imposed on them. Fighting child marriage requires transforming inequitable social structures and ending deeply internalized prejudice against women and girls. It requires instilling progressive attitudes supportive of gender justice, women's education, and empowerment.

While laws have prescribed 18 and 21 years as the minimum legal age of marriage for girls and boys respectively, the ground reality remains far removed. Myriad social, economic, and cultural forces continue to promote the practice despite legal prohibitions. The gap between law and social practice seems to be widening. The mismatch arises because the law by itself cannot transform underlying social mores, attitudes, and economic compulsions that drive child marriage. Enforcement mechanisms are inadequate to detect and prevent the many child marriages that happen secretly in remote villages. People's affinity to customary traditions outweighs their deference to modern laws. Hence, to bridge this gap, multi-pronged efforts are needed to act on these underlying drivers of child marriage.

Legal prohibitions must be backed by strong enforcement machinery and rigorous monitoring systems to detect and deter violations. Raising legal literacy among communities practicing child marriage would help generate more voluntary compliance. At the same time, larger social reform through education, skill development, gender sensitization, and economic uplift of girls is imperative. Political leaders must consistently spread awareness against child marriage and make its elimination a key governance priority with results measured through indicators tied to official performance incentives. Continuous engagement with the people, especially in remote rural pockets, can shape attitudes over time and close this gap between law and social practice.

2.4 Illiteracy: Lack of education perpetuates regressive social practices like child marriage. Uneducated parents do not understand the harms of early marriage. They withdraw daughters from school to marry them off.⁴

2.5 Socio-cultural Factors Driving Child Marriage: India is a collective, family-centered society where social reputation and conformity to traditional norms matter greatly. In India, it is deeply rooted in sociocultural factors that influence and perpetuate this practice. These factors are complex and interconnected, shaping the mindset of communities and individuals. Some key sociocultural factors that normalize early marriage include:

⁴ Banerjee, Sangeeta and Sharma, Gayatri (2022). The Status of Child Marriage in India: A Guide for NGOs and CSOs on Using the Law to End Child Marriages in India.

2.6 Patriarchy and son preference: India has a deeply patriarchal social structure. Sons are preferred as lineage heirs. Post-puberty, restrictions are imposed on girls to safeguard family honor and marry them off early before any possibility of sexual activity outside marriage that can tarnish their reputation.

2.7 Caste endogamy: The caste system encourages marrying daughters within the same caste to retain purity and prevent dilution of bloodline from inter-caste marriages, even if underage. Lower castes emulate this practice of upper castes.

2.8 Lack of Education and Awareness: Limited access to education and awareness programs can contribute to the perpetuation of child marriage. In communities with low literacy rates, individuals may not fully understand the negative consequences of early marriage on health, education, and overall well-being.

2.9 Customs and Rituals: Marriage is often considered a sacred and essential ritual in many societies. Customs and rituals associated with marriage may be deeply embedded in the culture, contributing to the perpetuation of child marriage as an integral part of societal traditions.

2.10 Role of Religion: Child marriage in India is a complex social issue influenced by a variety of factors, including religious customs and perceptions. While it is important to note that not all religious communities in India practice or endorse child marriage, some traditions, and interpretations of religious texts contribute to the persistence of this harmful practice and also sustain the practice of child marriage in India. A few examples of the same would be:

- Hinduism has traditionally sanctioned pre-puberty marriages, especially for girls. Many Hindus believe marrying off daughters early is their religious duty.
- Muslims are permitted to marry minor girls who have reached puberty according to traditional Islamic jurisprudence. The lack of codified laws results in varying marriage ages for Muslim girls.

- Christians traditionally required parental consent for minors to marry. The outdated 1872 Christian marriage law even permits minor marriages without any age limit with parental approval.
- India's personal laws based on religion allow child marriages. Hence, many view marriage decisions as the domain of religious laws rather than modern civil laws.
- Local priests and village councils often aid and abet underage marriages. They validate child marriages by solemnizing and registering them despite the practice being illegal.
- Reluctance to adopt civil registration of marriages enables secret unlawful child marriages solemnized only as per religious rituals.
- Reform of personal laws around marriage age face resistance from religious orthodoxy which views it as interference in religious matters.
- Thus, regressive religious influences have perpetuated child marriage in India by sanctioning the practice and hindering modernizing legal reforms.

2.11 Role of Community Attitudes: Mindsets and attitudes of local communities also play a big role in sustaining child marriage in rural India. It is not only the duty of the legal system to uphold these moral codes of conduct to ensure the safety of children from crimes like these but also the duty of the communities that are a part of this nation. It should be seen as an abnormality in our society and should be abolished as a practice altogether to secure a better future for the coming generations and be set as a precedent for any other practices that follow the same outlook or approach in the society in the current day and age. Some ways in which the society can contribute towards these changes are:

Marrying girls early is seen as a social duty by many communities to protect family honor by avoiding premarital romances and teenage pregnancies.

Elders pressure parents to conform and marry minor girls according to prevailing social norms that view post-puberty girls as a liability and economic burden.

Parents of young grooms demand child brides below 18 for their sons due to strong societal preference for minor brides, regardless of law.

Village councils often order child marriages as a punitive measure against families where adolescents elope or girls reach puberty before marriage.

Ostracism and social boycotts deter families from opposing child marriages due to fear of alienation from their community if they protest or refuse to comply.

Lack of anonymity in rural settings and close surveillance make it hard for victims to report child marriages to officials as that can invite backlash.

Poverty and dependence on the community for livelihoods make disadvantaged groups like lower castes and tribes highly vulnerable to societal pressures for child marriage.

Thus, regressive attitudes coupled with fear of social censure severely constrain efforts to stop child marriages. Changing mindsets is essential.

2.12 Dowry: Dowry amount tends to increase with girls' age, so there is an incentive to marry them early to reduce dowry expenses.

2.13 Inadequate law enforcement: Despite strong laws like the 2006 Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, enforcement remains weak. Lack of reporting, insensitive police, remoteness, and community pressure impede legal deterrence.⁵

2.14 Political apathy: Lack of adequate political will hampers proper enforcement and implementation of laws against child marriage. Problems of marginalized groups like oppressed caste and tribal girls get low priority.

⁵ Sec 10 of Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 states that "Whoever performs, conduct, directs or abets any child marriage shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment which may extend to two year and shall be liable to fine which may extend to one lakh rupees unless he proves that he had reasons to believe that the marriage was not a child marriage."

2.15 Customs and traditions: Social customs and traditions normalize early marriage. Going against community norms to stop child marriages can risk backlash and ostracisation.

3. Consequences of Child Marriage

Child marriage has extremely adverse effects on children's lives, denying them their rights and truncating their childhood. It not only takes away their chance at a normal life but also forces them to acquire roles and responsibilities that should not be associated with a child under any given circumstances in any part of society. The consequences of child marriage include but are not limited to:

3.1.1 Health risks: Child brides face major reproductive health problems like early pregnancies before their bodies are physically mature, leading to complications, miscarriages, stillbirths, maternal mortality, fistula, etc. They are also vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS.

3.1.2 Health Consequences of Child Marriage: Child marriage has extremely deleterious effects on the health and well-being of affected girls mentally, physically, and emotionally, carrying traumatizing effects with them which can make the lives of the affected children arduous and negatively influence their daily functions and manifesting serious physiological abnormalities. The major consequences that arise from such practices include:

Early pregnancy & motherhood: Young girls who marry early face high risks of adolescent pregnancy even before their bodies are physically mature enough. This leads to complications like eclampsia, preterm birth, stillbirths, miscarriages, and maternal mortality, besides permanently impairing their health.

Obstructed labour: Underdeveloped pelvic bones lead to prolonged obstructed labour which can cause an obstetric fistula, leading to urinary and fecal incontinence in young mothers. Fistula causes life-long disability and social exclusion.⁶

⁶ Fan, S., Koski, A. The health consequences of child marriage: a systematic review of the evidence. *BMC Public Health* **22**, 309 (2022).

3.1.3 Infant health: Babies born to minor mothers have higher risks of low birth weight, malnutrition, and neonatal mortality due to poor maternal health and lack of maturity.

3.1.4. Mental health issues: Forced adolescent marriage and motherhood lead to psychological problems like clinical depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicidal tendencies in many young brides.

3.1.5. HIV/AIDS: Married girls are more susceptible to HIV infection due to lack of awareness, inability to negotiate safe sex, and the likelihood of older husbands having sexual relations outside marriage.

3.1.6. Sexual violence: Young brides face a high risk of marital rape and domestic abuse due to inequality, powerlessness, and inability to resist forced sex in unwanted marriages before attaining maturity.

3.1.7. Reproductive health problems: Early and frequent unplanned pregnancies lead to cervical cancer, maternal exhaustion with pregnancy complications, fistula, uterine prolapse, anemia, and premature aging.

3.1.8. Treatment barriers: Young wives have constrained mobility, financial dependence, and inability to access healthcare. Taboos around adolescent sexuality inhibit them from seeking contraception or treatment for RTIs/STIs.

3.1.9. Lack of maternal care knowledge: Being immature mothers, child brides remain ignorant about pregnancy healthcare, safe delivery, breastfeeding, and neonatal and child health, leading to high infant and child mortality.⁷

⁷ *ibid*

The health consequences of child marriage are devastating for young brides and their children. Comprehensive policy action is needed to mitigate these adverse health impacts through measures like ensuring access to adolescent sexual health education and services, permitting abortion for minor pregnant girls, providing special maternal healthcare and nutrition for young brides, and crucially, ending child marriage itself. Steps to safeguard these children should take precedence, but their health in all aspects as mental, physical, and emotional should be a subject of concern too especially for those who are in danger of becoming the next victim of these rural, cultural practices.^{8s}

3.2.1. Economic Consequences of Child Marriage: Child marriage has far-reaching economic repercussions as it cuts short girls' education and severely curtails their income-earning potential, economic productivity, financial autonomy, and well-being. Child marriage takes away the basic rights of education and livelihood from these children leaving them in an uncomfortable situation where they end up as prisoners of their situation without any possible means of self-sufficiency. It is of utmost prominence to protect them and to ensure their basic rights are given to them to present them with a chance to make them self-sufficient financially, majorly to secure a way for them to get out of such situations. Major economic complications in cases of child marriage include:

3.2.2. Educational loss: Girls married early drop out of school and remain uneducated, which hampers their ability to earn income, be employed in well-paying jobs, and achieve economic independence.

3.2.3. Low skill development: With little education, child brides cannot learn job skills so remain unskilled and suitable only for marginal, low-wage work in the informal sector. Their productivity and income-earning ability suffer.

3.2.4. Poverty: Child marriage perpetuates the feminization of poverty across generations. With no education or skills, and total financial dependence on husbands, child brides are highly likely to be poor or remain stuck in poverty.

⁸ UNFPA, Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy, State of World Population, 2013.

Curtailed work participation: Young married girls get confined to the domestic sphere with restrictions on mobility and little opportunity to work for an income due to social taboos and family responsibilities.

3.2.5. Loss in earnings over a lifetime: Due to lost education and income-earning opportunities, child marriage results in significant aggregate income loss over the working life cycle of affected girls and their families.

3.2.6. Lower productivity: Child brides are unable to achieve their full human capital potential and contribute productively to economic growth. Early marriage reduces their lifetime workforce participation and economic output.

3.2.7. High fertility and population growth: Marrying early leads to unplanned frequent childbirths which reduces female labor force participation and increases India's population growth rate, hampering development.

3.2.8. Intergenerational poverty transmission: Daughters of uneducated child brides are more likely to be married early too and remain impoverished, perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty.

Child marriage has far-reaching economic ramifications for girls, their children, and the nation. Ending this practice is imperative to harness India's demographic dividend by enabling education and full participation of women in the economy.

3.2.9. Education loss: Marriage cuts short the education of girls who get burdened with marital responsibilities. Lack of education perpetuates their dependence and gender inequality.⁹

⁹ Art-21-A, *The Constitution of India, 1950*

3.2.10. Poverty: Early marriage sustains the cycle of poverty as uneducated young brides lack skills, information, and autonomy for work and income generation. Their poverty status deprives their children too.

3.2.11. Domestic violence: Young brides with much older spouses are often sexually abused in unequal relationships. Their low status and economic dependence increase their vulnerability to abuse.¹⁰

3.2.12. Psychological harm: Forced marriage before adolescence leads to lasting psychological trauma due to the abrupt rupture of childhood, loss of autonomy, and no say in life decisions.

3.2.13. Infant mortality: Babies born to minor mothers face a higher risk of malnutrition and death due to the mother's physical immaturity.

3.2.14. Population growth: Child marriage contributes to higher fertility and population growth as girls married early have children early without adequate spacing.

3.2.15. Lost opportunities: Robbed of their childhood, education, and skill development, child brides cannot actualize their potential. Early marriage traps them in low-status roles with limited horizons.

4. Legal Framework on Child Marriage

There have been many discussions on the protection of children from issues related and similar to child marriage which were prevalent even during the times of British occupied India. The discussion brought forth the first set of legal frameworks to impede such acts. These preceding decisions have helped a lot over the years and have incorporated a lot of important suggestions to create a safer future for children, although there is still time to see its effects in the nation as a whole, especially in the

¹⁰ *Ibid*

rural parts where this problem mostly persists. India has enacted several laws aimed at preventing child marriages. These laws and provisions include:

- *The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929*, also called the Sarda Act, introduced minimum marriage ages of 14 for girls and 18 for boys.
- Amendments in 1978 to the Sarda Act further increased the minimum female marriage age to 18 years.
- *The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA)* in 2006 replaced the Sarda Act and made child marriage illegal and voidable. It set 18 as the minimum age for girls and 21 for boys.
- The PCMA punishes any male adult marrying a child and anyone facilitating, permitting, or solemnizing child marriage with up to 2 years imprisonment and/or fine up to Rs 1 lakh.
- The PCMA overrides personal laws and applies to all communities across India. Consent of children or parents is immaterial.
- Sex with a minor wife constitutes rape as per *The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012*, and the decision of the Supreme Court of India.¹¹
- *The Right to Education Act of 2009* makes education compulsory and free for children aged 6-14 years aiming to reduce school dropouts including due to marriage.
- *The National Policy for Children was adopted in 2013* to emphasize the elimination of child marriage as a key priority.
- *The Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021* proposes to raise the minimum marriage age for girls from 18 to 21 years, at par with the legal age for men.

Despite robust laws, enforcement continues to be weak, requiring greater commitment and priority for implementation. Sustained awareness campaigns, sensitization of law enforcement machinery, ensuring accountability of officials mandated to prevent child marriages, encouraging reporting, and social sanctions against law breakers can strengthen deterrence against this practice. These relatively small actions may help in the complete abolition of these flawed cultural practices altogether.

¹¹ [2017] 10 SCC 800, AIR 2017 SC 4904.

Ensuring that no more children have to suffer from it or even if they do, they have a voice in the court of law to help them become free from such actions.

5. Suggested Solutions

There are no guaranteed solutions to resolve a deep-rooted problem that is directly linked to the cultural and superstitious beliefs of our nation, but it is important that every effort is made in an attempt to secure a possibility of stopping these stereotypical practices from occurring in the future.

A few suggestions in accordance with the same would include:

5.1 Access to Reproductive Health Services: Child brides in India typically lack information, awareness, and access to reproductive and sexual health services which are crucial for their well-being. Major gaps that need urgent public policy attention include:

5.2 Lack of sex education: With child marriage, young adolescent girls are suddenly expected to become sexually active without any prior preparation or awareness about sexuality, contraception, consent, or rights. This makes them vulnerable.

Unmet need for contraception: Child brides have a high unmet need for contraception for delaying and spacing pregnancies as traditional taboos inhibit open discussion about family planning. Their large unplanned families propagate poverty.¹²

5.3 Inadequate maternal health services: Prenatal check-ups, safe hygienic delivery facilities, skilled birth attendants, and emergency obstetric care remain out of reach for many child brides who are also too young to access these services. This results in high maternal and infant morbidity and mortality.

5.4 Unsafe illegal abortions: Many child brides experiencing unwanted adolescent pregnancies resort to illegal unsafe abortions which become a major cause of maternal death and health complications like sepsis and hemorrhage due to lack of access to safe legal abortion.

¹² Supra

5.5 No menstrual hygiene management: Poor menstrual hygiene management resources like sanitary napkins, adequate private toilet facilities, and cultural taboos around menstruation create major health challenges for young newly married girls reaching puberty.

5.6 HIV risks: Child brides engage in unprotected sex due to the inability to negotiate safe practices and remain at high risk of contracting HIV infection from older husbands practicing risky behaviors. Widowed/separated child brides can also be driven into sex work increasing their HIV vulnerability.

5.7 Obstetric fistula: With their bodies still developing, obstructed labour from delivering babies is common in child brides, causing debilitating fistula deformities like leaking urine which leads to adverse physical health and social ostracization.

The existence of multi-pronged initiatives is urgently required to expand child brides' access to reproductive and sexual health information and services across India. This will avert considerable maternal and infant morbidity and mortality besides facilitating informed choice and agency for adolescent girls over their fertility and overall well-being.

- **Legal reform:** Make marriage registrations compulsory and void undocumented marriages. Amend personal laws that allow underage marriage with parental consent. Enhance prosecution of officials abetting illegal child marriages.
- **Enforcement:** Strengthen enforcement machinery, establish dedicated investigative units and fast-track courts, encourage compulsory reporting of child marriages, and invoke community monitoring of violations.
- **Education:** Universalize girls' education up to secondary level, provide financial incentives to parents to delay daughters' marriage, and ensure schools are girl friendly.
- **Empowerment:** Invest in skill development and jobs for women, facilitate self-help groups, microfinance, and entrepreneurship to empower women financially and socially.

- **Awareness:** Use mass media, social media, village meetings, and women's groups to highlight the harms of child marriage and legal provisions, and change social attitudes among communities where child marriage is rife.
- **Child protection:** Identify vulnerable girls at risk of early marriage through village surveys and child protection committees, and provide counseling and support to parents.
- **Healthcare:** Ensure accessible adolescent reproductive health services, prenatal care and delivery assistance for young mothers, and HIV prevention outreach for child brides.
- **Shelters:** Expand shelter homes network for girls fleeing child marriage with provision for legal aid, vocational training, and education.
- **Incentives:** Provide financial incentives for families to delay their daughter's marriage through conditional cash transfer schemes. Sustain incentives till the age of 20 to deter parents from marrying girls at 18.

An important step to see any progress in these suggestions would be changing the mindsets of the communities and making the lives of girls a priority as a part of the development discourse. The practice cannot be eliminated through legal diktat alone without social acceptance. Sustained engagement with the people, advocacy, and community mobilization is crucial. With the proper enforcement of laws, social progress, and change in the understanding of different cultural practices, and the lifting of constraints that foster this practice, the aim to eradicate child marriage within a generation would become a possibility.

6. Eradicating Child Marriage in India: A Multifaceted Approach

Child marriage, a pernicious human rights violation, robs girls of their childhood, jeopardizes their health and well-being, and plunges them into poverty and subjugation. While outlawed in India, its deep social roots render legal prohibitions alone insufficient. Eradicating this scourge requires a collaborative, multifaceted approach spanning legal, administrative, social, economic, and health spheres.

6.1 Addressing the Root Causes:

- **Education:** Prioritizing girls' access to quality secondary education empowers them with informed decision-making, challenges traditional gender norms, and breaks the cycle of poverty that fuels child marriage.
- **Economic Opportunities:** Equipping girls and women with economic independence through skill development programs, microfinance initiatives, and land ownership reduces their vulnerability to being married off for financial reasons.
- **Community Engagement:** Fostering open dialogue and awareness campaigns within communities, targeting influential figures like religious leaders and elders, dismantling harmful social norms, and fostering collective action against child marriage.

6.2 Strengthening Legal and Enforcement Mechanisms:

- **Stricter Law Enforcement:** Rigorously enforcing existing laws through dedicated law enforcement units, fast-track courts for child marriage cases, and legal aid for victims creates accountability and discourages the practice.
- **Addressing Loopholes:** Thoroughly analyzing and closing loopholes in legislation that exempt child marriage under customary practices or religious justifications ensures comprehensive legal protection for girls.

6.3 Investing in Data and Research:

- **Data Collection and Analysis:** Regularly gathering and analyzing data on child marriage prevalence, causes, and consequences illuminates hotspots where interventions are most needed and enables measuring progress.
- **Research and Innovation:** Funding research on effective interventions and social mobilization strategies informs best practices for policymakers and practitioners, maximizing the impact of anti-child marriage efforts.

6.4 Collaboration and Sustainability:

- **Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships:** Building strong partnerships between lawmakers, bureaucrats, community leaders, NGOs, activists, and healthcare professionals leverages diverse expertise and resources for holistic intervention.
- **Sustained Engagement:** Recognizing that systemic change is a gradual process, sustained commitment across sectors and levels is crucial. Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of strategies ensure long-term impact and lasting reduction in child marriage rates.

Eradicating child marriage is not simply a legal issue; it requires a concerted effort to rewrite harmful social narratives, empower girls and communities, and strengthen legal frameworks. By adopting a multifaceted approach that prioritizes education, economic opportunities, community engagement, and robust legal measures, we can illuminate a future where girls in India, and worldwide, are free from the shackles of child marriage and blossom to their full potential. Child marriage is a pervasive human rights issue in India, affecting millions of children despite legal prohibitions. This comprehensive examination delves into the root causes, consequences, legal frameworks, and potential solutions surrounding child marriage in India. Despite legal interventions, a significant percentage of underage marriages persist, leading to severe repercussions for the individuals involved and society at large.

The causes of child marriage are multifaceted, driven by factors such as poverty, patriarchal norms, lack of education, dowry customs, inadequate law enforcement, political apathy, and deeply entrenched traditions. These elements contribute to a complex web that perpetuates child marriage, particularly impacting girls and violating their rights to health, education, equality, and a safe childhood.

The consequences of child marriage extend across various domains, including health risks, educational losses, perpetuation of poverty, vulnerability to domestic violence, psychological trauma, and high infant mortality. Legal frameworks, including the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), exist to address the issue, but enforcement remains weak, requiring a more significant commitment

to implementation. Suggested solutions encompass legal reforms, rigorous enforcement, universalizing girls' education, socioeconomic empowerment, awareness campaigns, child protection initiatives, accessible healthcare, shelters for at-risk girls, financial incentives, political commitment, and collective action. Changing societal attitudes is essential, requiring sustained efforts and collaboration across various sectors to ensure the well-being and empowerment of children, particularly girls. Social norms and gender bias play a significant role in sustaining child marriage, with patriarchal structures treating girls as economic burdens and perpetuating discriminatory practices. Bridging the gap between legal provisions and societal practices demands transformative efforts to challenge deeply ingrained prejudices against women and girls.

The health consequences of child marriage are severe, encompassing early pregnancies, obstructed labour, infant health risks, mental health issues, HIV/AIDS susceptibility, sexual violence, reproductive health problems, and treatment barriers. Economic repercussions include education loss, low-skill development, poverty perpetuation, curtailed work participation, lifetime earnings loss, lower productivity, high fertility, and intergenerational poverty transmission. Efforts to bridge the gap between law and social practice involve strengthening enforcement mechanisms, raising legal literacy, and initiating larger social reforms through education and gender sensitization. Continuous engagement with the public, particularly in remote rural areas, is essential to gradually shape attitudes and eliminate child marriage.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the stark reality of child marriage in India stands as an egregious violation of human rights, truncating the innocence of childhood, jeopardizing the health and well-being of young girls, and perpetuating a cycle of poverty and subjugation. Despite the existence of laws prohibiting this detrimental practice, its deep-rooted prevalence persists due to the formidable social sanctions that underpin and sustain it.

Child marriage in India demands a multifaceted strategy that combines legal reforms, rigorous enforcement, education, economic empowerment, awareness initiatives, healthcare services, and transformative social change. Bridging the gap between legal provisions and societal practices requires sustained efforts and collaboration across various sectors to ensure the well-being and

empowerment of children, particularly girls, within the broader context of human rights and development. Addressing the complex issue of child marriage necessitates a multifaceted and collaborative effort that brings together lawmakers, bureaucrats, community influencers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and dedicated activists. The implementation of legal prohibitions is crucial but not sufficient, as the battle extends to challenging and reshaping societal norms that staunchly support and perpetuate early marriages. Ensuring access to secondary education for girls becomes a pivotal element in empowering them to break free from the shackles of this tradition, allowing them to envision and pursue a future beyond the confines of early matrimony. Crucially, the transformation required to eliminate child marriage is contingent upon the mobilization of families and communities, redirecting their focus from marrying off their daughters prematurely to safeguarding and nurturing their growth. This shift in perspective demands a comprehensive approach, engaging various channels of influence, including legal frameworks, administrative initiatives, social campaigns, economic empowerment programs, and health interventions.

The sustained engagement advocated in the conclusion is not a one-dimensional effort but a harmonized orchestration of multiple strategies. Legal avenues must be fortified and implemented with rigor, societal norms must be challenged through awareness campaigns and education, economic empowerment programs should be tailored to uplift young girls, and health initiatives must address the unique challenges faced by those ensnared in early marriages.

Ultimately, the conclusion underscores the imperative of transformation at the grassroots level, necessitating a re-evaluation of deeply ingrained gender and social perceptions. The collaborative efforts proposed in the conclusion envision a society where the rights and well-being of its youngest members are paramount. Through a comprehensive and sustained approach, it is hoped that the scourge of child marriage in India can be effectively addressed and ultimately eradicated, paving the way for a future where every child can grow, learn, and thrive unencumbered by the chains of early matrimony.