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Child Marriage in India: Key Insights from the NFHS-5
(2019-21)

Child marriage is closely associated with poverty and is likely to increase girls' vulnerabilities. Girls who marry young are often socially isolated and cut-off from family, friends and other support systems. They may face an increased risk of limited opportunities for education and decent work. In spite of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), the practice of child marriage remains pervasive due to factors spread across the socio-ecological spectrum, including structural inequalities and regressive social norms.
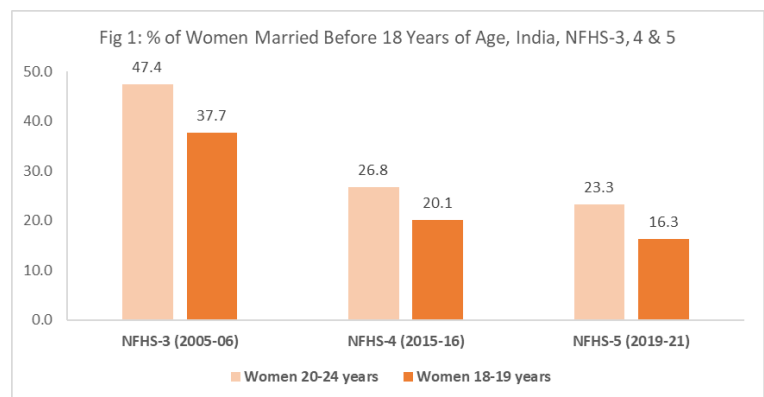
The objective of this analysis is to study and trace the trends in the practice of child marriage in India. The review is based on the latest data and evidence and will examine socio-economic determinants to understand the specific role of these factors, which perpetuate this harmful practice.

The most common way of measuring child marriage among women is the "percentage of women aged 20–24 years married before 18 years of age", provided by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). The choice of this particular age bracket is to circumvent capturing the complete information for girls below 18 years of age, who could still potentially get married before reaching 18. This estimate pertains to four years prior to the survey reference year. For example, NFHS-5 (2019–21) measures child marriage for the period around 2016.

With a deeper analysis of unit-level data, the paper also estimates the prevalence of child marriage among a younger cohort of women (aged 18- 19 years), which is about 1-2 years prior to NFHS-5 and hence more recent.
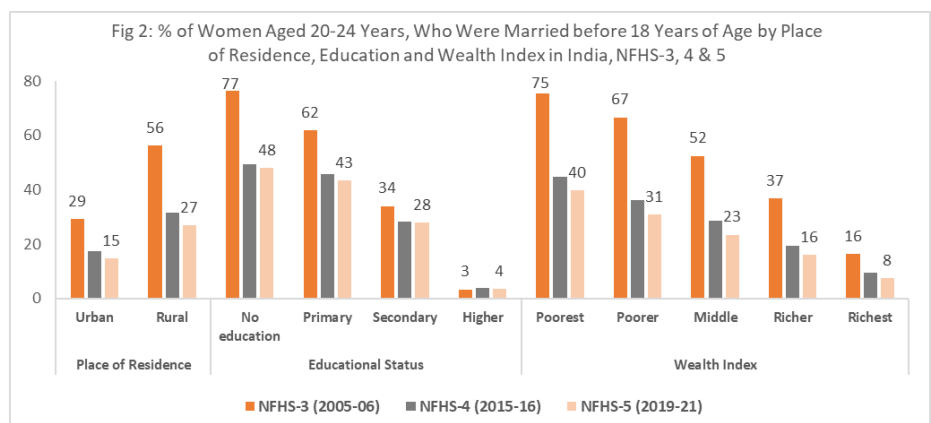
Trends

♦ The age at marriage in India is increasing over time. The median age of first marriage (among women 20–49 years of age) has increased by 2.0 years during the last decade and a half, from a level of 17.2 years in 2005–06 to 19.2 years in 2019–21. For men (age 25-29), this increased from 22.6 to 24.9 during the same period.

♦ Child marriage reduced from 47.4% in 2005–06 to 26.8% in 2015–16, registering a decline of 21% points during the decade (Fig 1). In the last five years, it declined by 3.5% points to reach 23.3%.

♦ 43% women aged 20-24 years are married by age 20, and 61% are married by age 21.

♦ Child marriage, when computed for the younger cohort of women (18–19 years), showed a decline from 37.7% in 2005-06 to 16.3% in 2019-21, indicating a growing trend for decline in the overall prevalence of child marriage in the years to come.

Fig 1: % of Women Married Before 18 Years of Age, India, NFHS-3, 4 & 5
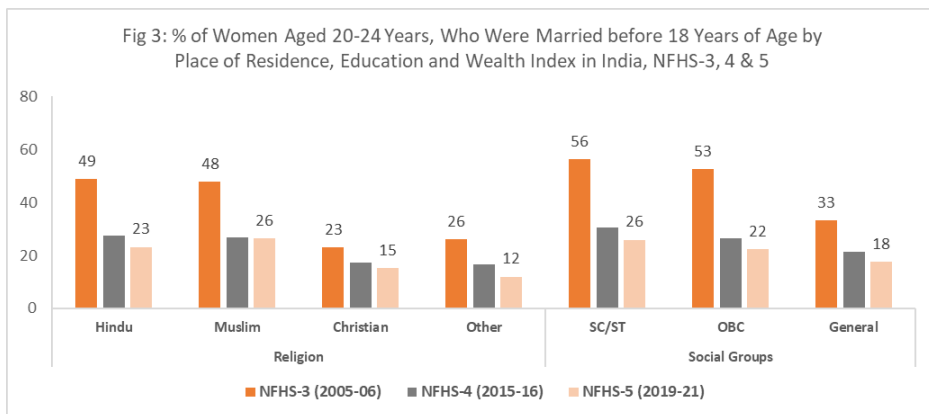
Differentials

The unit level data allows examining differentials in child marriage by socio-economic characteristics of the households and of women. This was estimated separately by the educational level of the girl; place of residence, caste and religion categories, and by the household wealth index, which is a proxy indicator of the economic status.

♦ Girls with either no or below primary level education have experienced higher levels of child marriage. As per the latest data, 48% of girls with no education were married below 18 years of age as compared to only 4% among those who attained higher education (Fig-2).

♦ Another striking feature is the variations in child marriage by the household wealth index. Our analysis of the NFHS-5 shows that a staggering 40% of the girls from the lowest

Fig 2: % of Women Aged 20-24 Years, Who Were Married before 18 Years of Age by Place of Residence, Education and Wealth Index in India, NFHS-3, 4 & 5

quintile were married before they turned 18 years of age. In a clear-cut contrast to this, only 8% of girls from the highest quintile got married before 18.

♦ The differentials in child marriage by religion and caste have narrowed down over the period of the survey. Child marriage has been relatively lower among Christians and other religious groups.
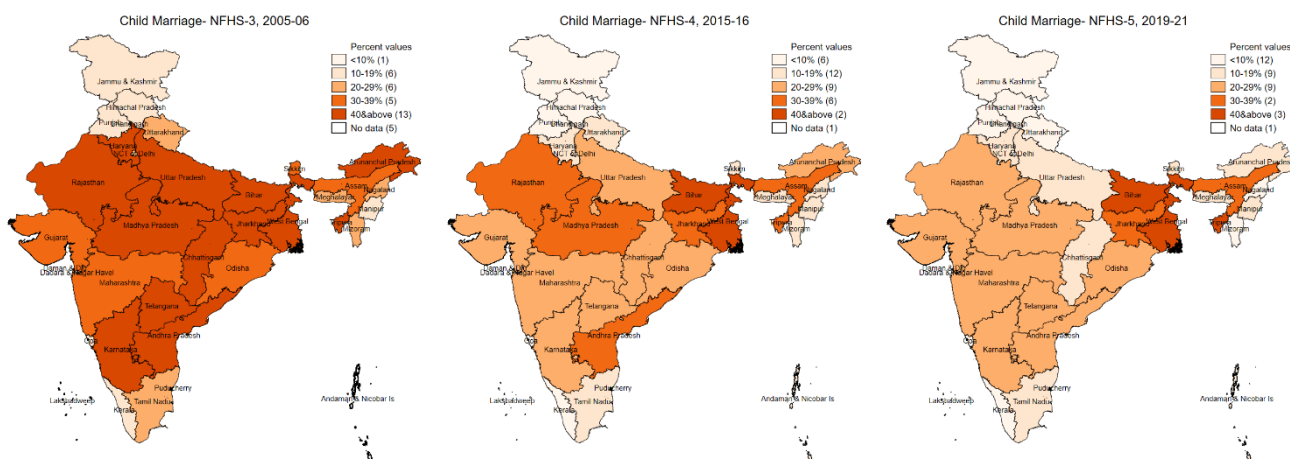

Fig 3: % of Women Aged 20-24 Years, Who Were Married before 18 Years of Age by Place of Residence, Education and Wealth Index in India, NFHS-3, 4 & 5

♦ The variations by caste category indicate a higher prevalence among Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/STs), with 26% marrying below the stipulated legal age. However, the variations among caste categories have also been narrowing over the years.

Differentials by State

With a vast diversity within India, it is imperative to analyse variations by states to understand and address why these differentials exist. Eight states have a higher prevalence of child marriage than the national average. Among them, West Bengal, Bihar and Tripura top the list with more than 40% of women aged 20-24 years married below 18. The other five states include Jharkhand, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Telangana.

Fig 4: State-wise Trends in Child Marriage in India, NFHS-3, 4 & 5

Determinants

♦ Multiple regression analysis of age at marriage indicates that a one-year increase in the education of girls will lead to higher age at marriage by 0.36 years, after controlling for the wealth index and the place of residence. Regression analysis also suggests that the poorest, poor and even middle categories have around 1.6 years' lower age at marriage compared to the richest category. The fourth quintile (richer category) has about one-year lower age at marriage in contrast to the richest category (Table 1).

♦ In logistics regression, an odds ratio greater than 1 shows a net positive association of the variable with child marriage and vice versa, after controlling for other variables (Table 2).

♦ The odds for girls marrying below 18 years of age are much higher for the women with lower levels of educational attainment (OR=15.5 vs OR=1.0).

♦ The odds that a woman belonging to the poorest wealth quintile, marrying before age 18 are 1.5 times higher than those who are in the richest quintile (OR=1.47 vs OR=1.0). The odds ratios are higher for women residing in rural areas and lower among those belonging to the Muslim, Christian and other religious communities compared to Hindus. The odds ratios are significantly higher among Scheduled Tribes.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis of Married Women (Aged 25 Years and Above), India, 2019-21

Background Charcteristics	Beta coeff.	Std error	t
(Constant)	18.837[***]	0.019	973.746
Highest year of education	0.356[***]	0.003	133.461
Type of place of residence	0.434[***]	0.014	30.672
Poorest	-1.788[***]	0.022	-82.224
Poor	-1.828[***]	0.02	-89.277
Middle	-1.577[***]	0.019	-82.313
Richer	-1.109[***]	0.018	-61.867
Sig: ***p<.005			

Table 2: Odds ratio from logistics regression of women aged 20-24 years married < 18 years of age, NFHS-5

Characteristics	Odd Ratio	Characteristics	Odd Ratio
Educational status		*Wealth status*	
Ref Cat: Higher		Ref Cat: Richest	
No education	15.508[***]	Poorest	1.472[***]
Primary	12.867[***]	Poorer	1.454[***]
Secondary	6.141[***]	Middle	1.361[***]
		Richer	1.229[***]
Religion		*Social groups*	
Ref Cat: Hindu		Ref Cat: General	
Muslim	0.814[***]	Schedule tribe	1.055[***]
Christian	0.523[***]	Schedule caste	0.790[***]
Other	0.528[***]	OBC	1.009
Place of residence			
Ref Cat: Urban			
Rural	1.158[***]		
Sig: ***p<.005			