

Child Marriage in Bihar: 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.

Child marriage has declined over one and a half decades, however, it the incidence remains high in Bihar with around 41% of the women in the age group of 20-24 marrying before 18.

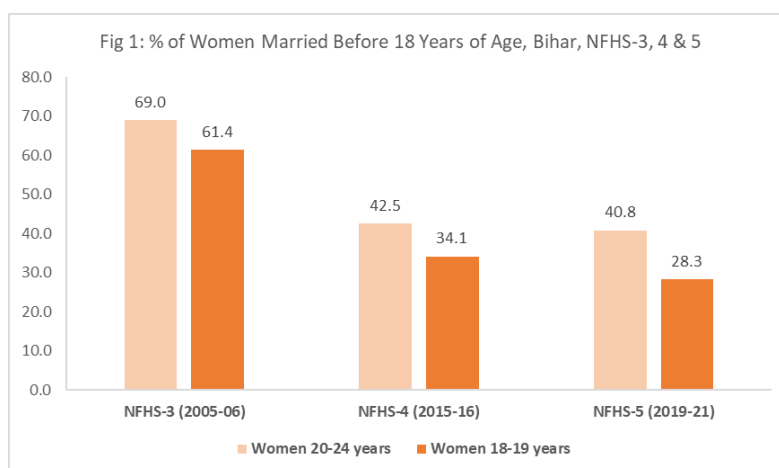
The objective of this analysis is to study and trace the trends in the practice of child marriage in Bihar. The review will examine socio-economic determinants to understand the specific role of these factors, which perpetuate this harmful practice.

The most common way of measuring the incidence of 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 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 of 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

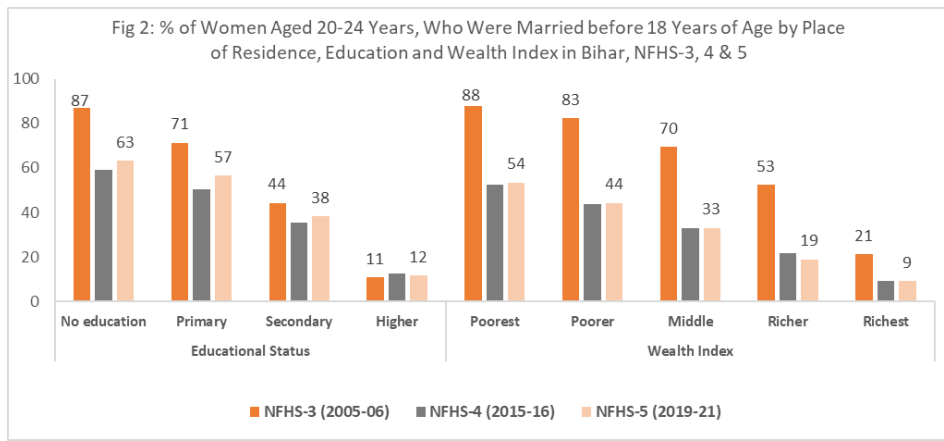
- ◆ The age at marriage in Bihar is increasing over time. The median age of first marriage (among women 20–49 years of age) has increased by 2.3 years during the last decade and a half, from a level of 15.1 years in 2005–06 to 17.4 years in 2019–21. However, it is still around 1.8 years less than the median age for the country as a whole.
- ◆ For men (age 25-29), this increased from 20.1 to 21.9 years during the same period. This is 3 years less than the national average.
- ◆ Child marriage in Bihar reduced from 69% in 2005–06 to 42.5% in 2015–16, registering a decline of around 27% points during the decade (Fig 1). In the last five years, it declined by less than 2% points to reach 40.8%.
- ◆ More than two-thirds of women (65%) aged 20-24 years are married by age 20, and 82% are married by age 21.
- ◆ Child marriage, when computed for the younger cohort of women (18–19 years), showed a decline from 61.4% in 2005-06 to 28.3% in 2019-21, indicating a growing trend for decline in the overall prevalence of child marriage in the years to come.



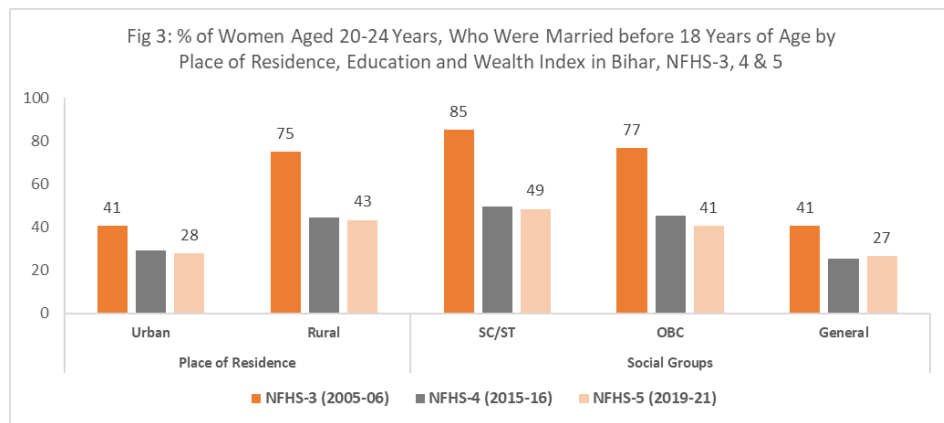
Differentials

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 of education have experienced higher levels of child marriage. As per the latest round of data, 63% of girls with no education were married below 18 years of age as compared to only 12% among those attaining 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 54% of the girls from the lowest quintile were married before they turned 18 years of age. In a clear-cut contrast to this, only 9% of girls from the highest quintile got married before 18.



- ◆ Child marriage is higher among girls living in rural areas (43%) (Fig-3), compared to those living in urban areas (28%).
- ◆ The variations by caste category indicate a higher prevalence among Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/STs), with 49% marrying below the stipulated legal age. However, the variations among caste categories have also been narrowing over the years.



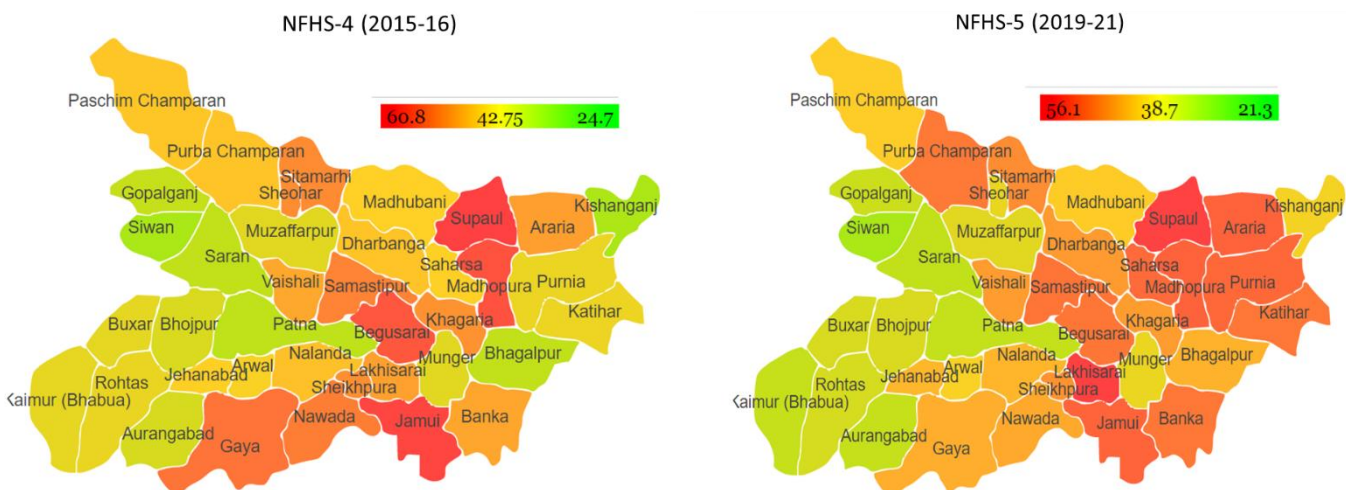
Differentials by District

With a vast diversity within the state, it is imperative to analyse variations by districts to understand and address why these differentials exist. In 2015-06, district Supaul had the highest incidence of child marriage at 60.8%, which continues to remain at the top with 56% in 2019-21. On the other hand, the lowest proportion of child marriage is found in Siwan, at 21.3%, which declined from 24.7 since 2015-16.

Out of 38 districts of the state, 12 districts reported a higher incidence of higher child marriage than the state average as per the NFHS-5. These included, Lakhisarai, Supaul, Araria, Madhepura, Jamui, Purnia, Saharsa, Samastipur, Begusarai, Banka, Katihar and Purba Champaran. The majority of these districts lie in the eastern part of the state.

The district-level data also indicates an increase in the percent of child marriage in about 5-6 districts. This could be due to sample size issues. The sample size of women aged 20-24 years are less than 200 in these districts. Therefore, caution needs to be exercised while interpreting trends, unless considering the sampling error, which usually comes with survey-based estimates.

Fig 4: District wise Trends in Child Marriage in Bihar, NFHS-4 and 5



Determinants

- ◆ Multiple regression analysis of *age at marriage* in Bihar indicates that just a one-year increase in the education of girls will lead to a higher age at marriage by 0.19 years, after controlling for the wealth index and the place of residence. In other words, to increase the age at marriage of women in the state, the number of years of a girls education needs to be increased by five years (Table 1).
- ◆ Regression analysis also suggests that the poorest, poor and even middle categories have around 2 years' lower age at marriage compared to the richest category. The fourth quintile (richer category) has about one and half years lower age at marriage in contrast to the richest category (Table 1).

Background Characteristics	Beta coeff.	Std error	t
(Constant)	18.806 ^{***}	0.093	201.471
Highest year of education	0.195 ^{***}	0.009	21.348
Type of place of residence	0.393 ^{***}	0.057	6.913
Poorest	-2.013 ^{***}	0.094	-21.444
Poor	-2.186 ^{***}	0.093	-23.442
Middle	-1.928 ^{***}	0.093	-20.625
Richer	-1.582 ^{***}	0.095	-16.601

Sig: ***p<.005

Characteristics	Odd Ratio	Characteristics	Odd Ratio
Educational status		Wealth status	
Ref Cat: Higher		Ref Cat: Richest	
No education	7.473 ^{***}	Poorest	1.261 ^{***}
Primary	6.832 ^{***}	Poorer	1.545 ^{***}
Secondary	3.884 ^{***}	Middle	1.463 ^{***}
		Richer	1.386 ^{***}
Religion		Social groups	
Ref Cat: Hindu		Ref Cat: General	
Muslim	0.608 ^{***}	Schedule tribe	0.730 ^{***}
Christian	0.565	Schedule caste	0.932 [*]
Other	0.786	OBC	0.739 ^{***}
Place of residence			
Ref Cat: Urban			
Rural	1.272 ^{***}		

Sig: ***p<.005

- ◆ To understand the socio-economic factors affecting *child marriage* in the state, a logistic regression analysis was carried out using the unit level data of the NFHS-5. The logistics regression provides odds ratios for each variable included in the analysis. 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 women with lower levels of educational attainment (OR=7.5 vs OR=1.0 for the higher level of education). As girls attain primary or secondary levels of education, the odd ratios decreases, which clearly indicates a strong relationship between girls' education and her chances of getting married as child.
- ◆ The odds that a woman belonging to the poorest wealth quintile, marrying before age 18 is 1.5 times higher than those who are in the richest quintile (OR=1.2 vs OR=1.0). The odds ratios are higher for women residing in rural area and lower among those belonging to the Muslim faith, Christian and other religions compared to Hindus. The odds ratios are significantly lower among scheduled castes and other backward caste categories compared to the general caste in the state.