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Child Marriage in West Bengal: 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. Despite 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 West Bengal with around 42% of the women in the age group of 20-24 marrying before 18.
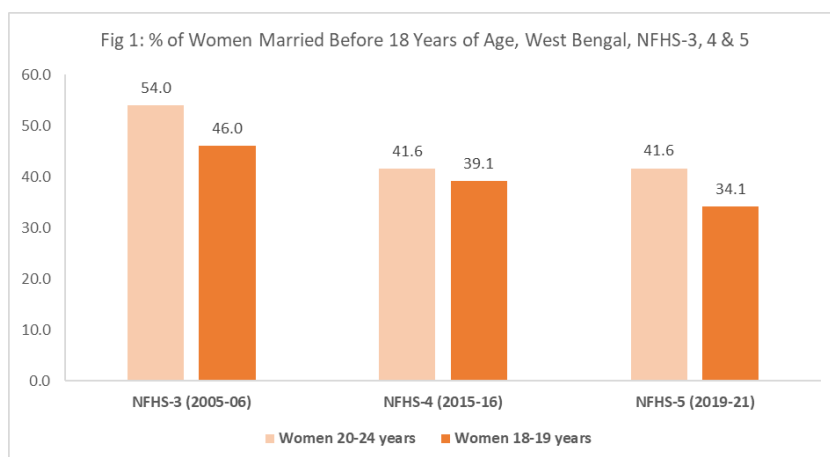
The objective of this analysis is to study and trace the trends in the practice of child marriage in West Bengal. The review will examine socio-economic determinants to understand the specific role of these factors, which perpetuate this harmful practice.

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 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.
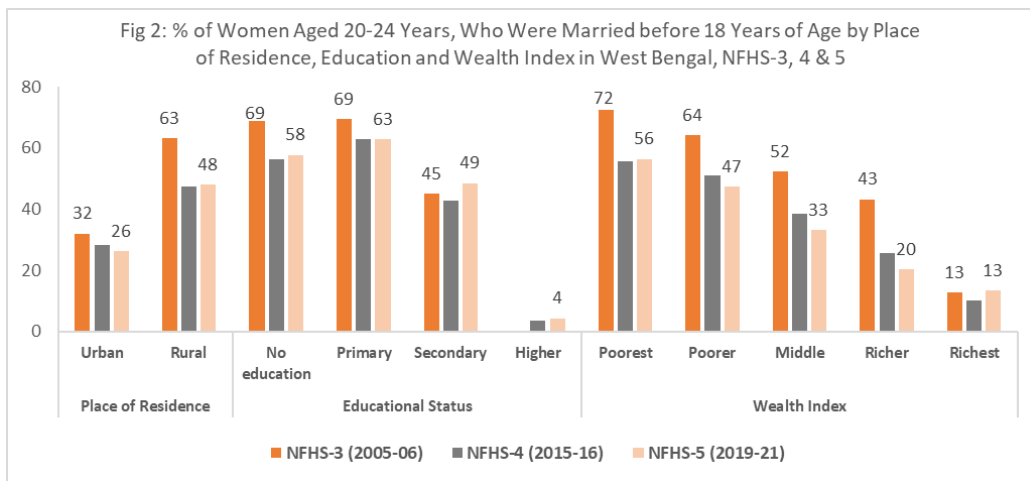
Trends

♦ The age at marriage in West Bengal is increasing over time. The median age of first marriage (among women 20–49 years of age) has increased only by 1 year during the last decade and a half, from a level of 17.0 years in 2005–06 to 18.0 years in 2019–21. However, it is still around 1.2 years less than the median age for the country as a whole.

♦ Child marriage in West Bengal reduced from 54.0% in 2005–06 to 41.6% in 2015–16, registering a decline of around 12% points during the decade (Fig 1). In the last five years, it has remained constant.

♦ More than two-thirds of women (66%) aged 20-24 years are married by age 20, and 74.1% are married by age 21.

♦ Child marriage, when computed for the younger cohort of women (18–19 years), showed a decline from 46.0% in 2005-06 to 34.1% in 2019-21,

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

indicating a growing trend for decline in the overall prevalence of child marriage in the years to come.
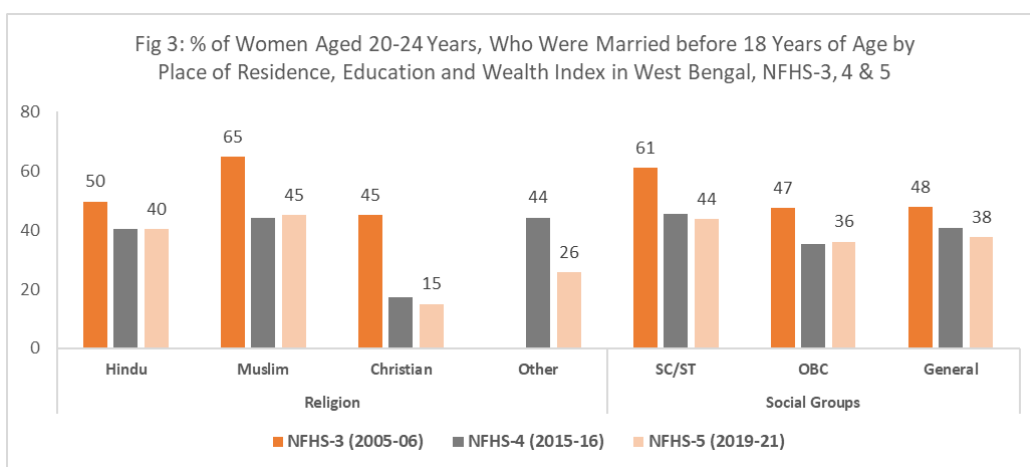
Differentials

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 education have experienced higher levels of child marriage. As per the latest round of data, 58% 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 56% of the girls from the lowest quintile were married before they turned 18 years of age. In a clear-cut contrast to this, only 13% of girls from the highest quintile got married before 18.
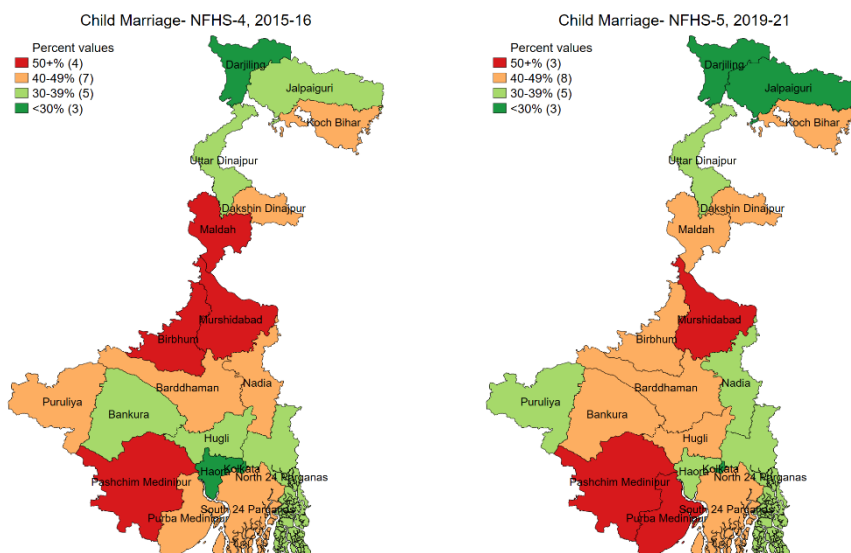
Fig 2: % of Women Aged 20-24 Years, Who Were Married before 18 Years of Age by Place of Residence, Education and Wealth Index in West Bengal, NFHS-3, 4 & 5

- ♦ Child marriage is higher among girls living in rural areas (48%) (Fig-3), compared to those living in urban areas (26%).
- ♦ The variations by caste category indicate a higher prevalence among Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/STs), with 44% marrying below the stipulated legal age. However, the variations among caste categories have also been narrowing over the years.

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 West Bengal, NFHS-3, 4 & 5

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 Maldah had the highest incidence of child marriage at 55.6%, which Purba and Pachimi Mednipur occupies with highest incidence of more than 56% in 2019-21. Along with these, in three districts, namely Mushidabad, Birbhum and Purba Bardhman are those having more than 50% of child marriage.

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

On the other hand, the lowest proportion of child marriage is found in Kolkata, at 16.8%, which declined from 18.5% since 2015-16. The other two districts with lower incidence of child marriage are Jalpaiguri (18.7%) and Darjiling (21.3%).

The district-level data also indicates an increase in the percent of child marriage in about 8 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.

Determinants

♦ Multiple regression analysis of *age at marriage* in West Bengal indicates that just a one-year increase in the education of girls will lead to a higher age at marriage by 0.34 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 girl's education needs to be increased by three years (Table 1).

♦ Regression analysis also suggests that the poorest and poor categories have more than three 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).

♦ 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).

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis of Married Women (Aged 25 Years and Above), India, 2019-21			
Background Characteristics	Beta coeff.	Std error	t
(Constant)	19.247***	0.091	211.268
Highest year of education	0.338***	0.01	35.119
Type of place of residence	0.690***	0.049	13.964
Poorest	-3.363***	0.089	-37.82
Poor	-3.256***	0.086	-37.945
Middle	-2.914***	0.083	-35.11
Richer	-1.709***	0.082	-20.762
Sig: ***$p<.005$			

♦ The odds for girls marrying below 18 years of age are much higher for women with lower levels of educational attainment (OR=22.7 vs OR=1.0 for the higher level of education). As girls attain primary or secondary levels of education, the odd ratios decrease, 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 1.9 times higher than those who are in the richest quintile (OR=1.87 vs OR=1.0). The odds ratios are higher for women residing in rural area. The odds ratio are lower among those belonging to the Muslim faith, Christian and other religions compared to Hindus and among scheduled tribes or castes compared to the general caste in the state, but these are not statistically significant, hence only education, wealth index and place of residences are the dominant determinants of child marriage in the state.

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	22.762***	Poorest	1.878***
Primary	30.188***	Poorer	1.542**
Secondary	18.708***	Middle	1.067
		Richer	0.759
Religion		*Social groups*	
Ref Cat: Hindu		Ref Cat: General	
Muslim	0.96	Schedule tribe / Caste	0.965
Christian	0.183	OBC	0.941
Other	0.577		
Place of residence			
Ref Cat: Urban			
Rural	1.550***		
Sig: ***$p<.005$			