Child marriage is closely associated with poverty and is likely to increase girls’ vulnerabilities. Child marriage affects both girls and boys, but it affects girls disproportionately. 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. The practice of child marriage remains pervasive due to factors spread across the socio-ecological spectrum, including structural inequalities and regressive social norms.

**TRENDS**

**Figure 1: Prevalence of child marriage (2005-06 to 2019-21)**

- **GIRLS (% of women aged 20-24 married before age 18):**
  - NFHS-3: 47.4%
  - NFHS-4: 26.8%
  - NFHS-5: 23.3%

- **BOYS (% of men aged 25-29 married before age 21):**
  - NFHS-3: 32.3%
  - NFHS-4: 20.3%
  - NFHS-5: 17.7%

India has recorded a steep decline in the prevalence of child marriage over the last 15 years.

**Figure 2: Median age at first marriage (in %)**

- The median age at marriage in India (women aged 20-49 and men aged 25-49) is increasing over time and has now surpassed the minimum legal age at marriage.
  - 2005-06: 17.2
  - 2019-21: 24.9

- Women aged 20-24 years are married by age 20:
  - 2005-06: 43%
  - 2019-21: 61%

- Women aged 25-29 years are married by age 21:
  - 2005-06: 19.2
  - 2019-21: 22.60

While increasingly lesser proportion of women are now married before age 18, a majority are married by age 21, signaling a transition in the marriage trends from child marriage to early marriage.

*Note: NFHS stands for National Family Health Survey. Data is taken from NFHS 3 (2005-06), NFHS 4 (2015-16) and NFHS 5 (2019-21).*
CHILD MARRIAGE AND ASSOCIATED FACTORS

Girls belonging to poorer families, living in rural areas, and with little or no education are more likely to experience child marriage.

48% of girls with no education were married below 18 years of age as compared to only 4% among those who attained higher education.

40% of girls from the lowest quintile were married before they turned 18 years of age, contrasted against 8% from the highest wealth quintile.

The prevalence of child marriage is almost double in rural areas when compared to urban areas.

DATA INDICATES A HIGHER PREVALENCE among Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SC/STs), with 26% marrying below the stipulated legal age (3 percentage points higher than the national average), highlighting a need to undertake more focused programming.

MOTHERHOOD IN CHILDHOOD

53% of currently married women aged 15-19 have already begun childbearing.

EXPERIENCE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

- 29.3% of married women (aged 18-49 years) have faced spousal violence.
- 42% girls and 46% boys aged 15-19 years believe the husband is justified in beating his wife.
Approaches to end child marriage should be ushered in through a human rights based approach that transforms the material realities (education, health, skills, decent work) for girls.

**PATHWAYS FOR CHANGE**

**Addressing internalised inequitable values and attitudes**

Girls with no education are 16 times more likely to be married before age 18, and girls with only primary education are 13 times more likely to be married before age 18, than girls with higher levels of education.

The need of the hour is investments in quality secondary and higher education to enable girls to gain knowledge and skills, and expand their life-options.

**Access to rights based health information and services**

There is an urgent need for targeted delivery of essential life skills, including sexual and reproductive health information and services for adolescents (married and unmarried) to enable informed choice and reduce unintended pregnancy.

**Addressing poverty as a driver**

Girls from poorest families are 1.5 times more likely to be married before age 18, compared to girls from the wealthiest families.

We need inclusive economic growth that reaches the most marginalised communities and families to tackle poverty as a key driver of child marriage.

**Enhancing education opportunities**

Girls with no education are 16 times more likely to be married before age 18, and girls with only primary education are 13 times more likely to be married before age 18, than girls with higher levels of education.

The need of the hour is investments in quality secondary and higher education to enable girls to gain knowledge and skills, and expand their life-options.

**Promoting positive masculinity and engaging men and boys**

Men and boys are key stakeholders in addressing harmful practices and gender based violence – working with them is critical to advance empowerment oriented pathways for all.

We need to tackle harmful gender norms and power dynamics to ensure that girls (both married and unmarried) are empowered to make their own decisions about their lives and regarding if, when and whom they want to marry.