



Understanding underage marriage in Bihar

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- Underage marriage is of major concern for developing countries as it affects human capital. This study analyses the factors behind child marriage in Bihar through interviews and a list experiment.
- The study examines the main determinants of underage marriage in Bihar, explores the role of current government policies, and investigates prevailing social attitudes.
- Policy recommendations include improving access to and quality of education, especially for girls; providing incentives to continue education until eighteen; canvassing all government schemes adequately; and improving law and order, tackling crime perception and feelings of insecurity.

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In brief

This study tries to analyse the factors behind child marriage in Bihar, with a special focus on the security of women. Our analysis concludes that education is one of the most important factors that bring down the incidence of child marriage. Unlike all past studies, we have estimated the determinants of underage marriage among women from the characteristics of their paternal family by collecting information about paternal families through primary data.

It has been observed that the education of the mother always plays an important role in reducing the chances of early marriage. Poverty and insecurity in the parental home also increase the chances of underage marriage. Since marriage depends on both the demand and supply of underage brides, we have estimated the determinants of the demand for underage brides from the information collected about the in-laws' families.

It is observed that poverty increases the demand for underage brides. On the other hand, affluence drives a boy to marry early, whilst he or the household facing any form of calamity pushes down the chances of early marriage. Security perception and attitudes towards romantic relationships, inter-religion and inter-caste marriage also affect the probability of early marriage of both boys and girls. It is likely that many teenagers are married off early to prevent any romantic complications.

Such social attitudes are deeply entrenched, and fear of social ostracism prevents respondents from agreeing that such marriages are acceptable. However, fear of social ostracism is reduced with education, and thus, the real positive influence that could bring down child marriage in the state is the promotion of education through various government schemes.

Overview of the research

UNICEF defines child marriage as the formal or informal union of a child before the age of eighteen. In India, however, the legal age of marriage for boys is twenty-one. In the period 2000-2011, over one-third of women aged 20-24 years in developing regions were married or in a union before they turned eighteen (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2012, p. 22). India was among 41 countries where more than 30% of women aged 20-24 were married. The problem is extremely acute in Bihar, where 43.4% of the girls are married before their eighteenth birthday (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2020).

While the incidence of underage marriage in Bihar is very widespread, the Government of Bihar has undertaken many policies like the Kanya Vivah Yojana in 2008 and the Kanya Uthyan Yojana more recently. However, in spite

of its efforts, underage marriage in rural Bihar has increased by 2.11% (International Institute for Population Sciences and ICF, 2017 & 2021). Thus, a better understanding of what drives underage marriage is needed in order to frame more targeted policies.

Child marriage is a result of the interplay between economic and social forces:

- This practice sometimes stems from poverty, as girls are married off early to cut down on family expenditure, whilst a boy's family gains a non-paid helping hand for domestic chores.
- In communities where the practice is prevalent, marrying a girl as a child is a part of the social norms and attitudes, with a very high value afforded to concepts of chastity before marriage and the honour of the girl and her family.
- Customary requirements such as dowries also enter into families' considerations, especially among those communities where lower dowry is associated with younger brides (UNFPA, 2012).
- While the above are definitely important, it is also imperative to study some other factors like law and order, perceptions of a lack of security, and the prevailing norms of rejecting self-initiated marriages outside caste and religion. Although these factors have remained unaddressed in the literature, this study attempts to focus on them.

With the above context in mind, this study aims to delve deeper into the following questions:

- What are the main determinants of underage marriage in Bihar?
- To what extent are people's attitudes regarding the role of a woman and expectations of chastity responsible for underage marriage?
- How does migration affect underage marriage?
- How is the probability of underage marriage affected by the prevailing law and order conditions and households' perception about the possibility of crime against women in the locality?

For this study, primary data was collected for 1,445 households from three districts of Bihar – Purnia, Vaishali and Kishanganj. The districts were chosen according to female literacy. In each household, one senior (above 30 years) and one junior (15-25 years) family member were interviewed. Along with the standard questions regarding their demographic, economic and education profile, these respondents were asked about the crimes they had heard of in their locality, their perception of insecurity and their opinions regarding marriage practices like "love marriage", inter-religious marriage, and inter-caste marriage. Married junior respondents were asked questions about their parental home, and demographic and economic details of their parental family. However, it was anticipated that the respondents would have some incentive to conceal their

responses, mainly due to social pressures and the desire to be politically correct. In order to avoid this, a list experiment was conducted. Through this experiment, the actual attitudes of the sample were revealed, helping us to understand the social conditioning behind underage marriage.

Policy motivation for research

Underage marriage is of major concern for developing countries as it affects human capital. The girls who are affected discontinue their education after marriage and face a life of uncertainty. Incidents of domestic violence are much higher in underage marriages, while teenage pregnancy increases maternal and child mortality. Policy makers have long grappled with this problem, but with limited success.

The Government of Bihar has introduced several policies to overcome this malaise, but it has been observed that underage marriage in rural Bihar has actually increased over the past few years. Thus, a study of social attitudes was needed to reveal exactly what the drivers behind underage marriage were so that targeted policies could be framed.

TABLE 1: Key research questions and findings

Key research questions	Summary of key findings
What are the main determinants of underage marriage in Bihar?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • Lack of education (literacy alone is insufficient for reducing underage marriage; education until age 18 is needed, and the quality of education is also a key factor). • Perceptions of insecurity (threat perception is more important than actual crime). • A fear that one's daughter would get romantically involved and form a marriage alliance not approved by society.
What is the role of government policies like Kanya Vivah Yojana and Kanya Uthyan Yojana?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an extremely low awareness of these two policies among the population. • Policies were not canvassed properly after being adopted.
What are the prevailing social attitudes towards inter-religious and inter-caste marriages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overwhelming majority (above 90%) disapproves. • Men are slightly more liberal than women, and young people are slightly more liberal than older people. • Nevertheless, for all categories, disapproval is more than 90%.
What are the prevailing social attitudes regarding the role of women and romantic relations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Though labour participation of women is extremely low in Bihar, only about 2% declare that women should never work. However, the experiment reveals that more than 14% feel so in private. • In contrast, while more than 90% openly object to romantic relationships, privately, only 42% disapprove. Thus, it is revealed that

social stigma associated with romance is severe, and people do not dare to voice their approval even if they actually think it is acceptable.

Policy recommendations

Improve access to and quality of education, especially for girls.

It is observed that literacy alone is insufficient in bringing down underage marriage. Formal schooling and, more importantly, continuing education till the age of eighteen is needed. Thus, it is necessary to subsidise and improve access to higher secondary schools. The quality of education should also be improved, as a large proportion drop out as they are unable to cope with their studies. Improving the quality of education would also reduce the need for private tuitions and bring down the cost of education for students.

Provide incentives to continue education until eighteen.

Introduce schemes to make education until the age of eighteen attractive for both boys and girls. Conditional Cash Transfer schemes like the Kanyashree Prakalpa in West Bengal should be considered instead of flat subsidisation of lump sum transfers.

Canvas all government schemes adequately.

Spread awareness of schemes designed to promote education and prevent child marriage. If necessary, implement these schemes through schools rather than government offices, as this approach facilitates more direct access for students to the intended benefits.

Improve law and order – more importantly, tackle crime perception and feelings of insecurity.

Improve law and order, focusing on rural low-income areas, to give people a sense of security which they currently lack. Highlight the actual low crime rate in the village, block, etc. Create information, education, and communication (IEC) material showcasing the improvement of law and order in the village and block, especially with regard to crimes against women. Introduce martial arts training for girls in schools, and also programmes like National Cadet Corps (NCC), so that they feel more empowered and confident.

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