

Child and Early Forced Marriage (CEFM)

Dr Mili Das

Research Associate, Economics, Nabakrushna Choudhry Centre For Development Studies

Abstract

Child and Early Forced Marriage (CEFM) continue to be a significant social and public health concern in Odisha, despite legal provisions and policy interventions. Rooted in poverty, gender inequality, cultural norms, and limited access to education, child marriage disproportionately affects girls, restricting their rights, health, and socio-economic opportunities.

The study is based on secondary data analysis using sources such as National Family Health Survey (NFHS) reports and relevant literature. It examines trends over time, inter-district variations, and the relationship between child marriage and key socio-economic indicators such as literacy and health outcomes in Odisha, with comparative insights at the national level.

Findings indicate a decline in female child marriage in Odisha from earlier decades; however, the rate of reduction is slower than the national average. Significant disparities persist across districts, with some regions reporting high prevalence rates. The analysis reveals a negative correlation between literacy and child marriage, highlighting education as a critical determinant. Early marriage is associated with adverse health outcomes, including higher maternal and child mortality, early pregnancies, and poor nutritional status. Additionally, it contributes to school dropout, limited agency, and increased vulnerability to domestic violence.

Child marriage remains a multidimensional issue requiring integrated and sustained interventions. Strengthening educational access, enhancing socio-economic opportunities, promoting community awareness, and ensuring effective implementation of legal frameworks are essential. A life-cycle approach focusing on empowering adolescents with knowledge, skills, and decision-making capacity is crucial for eliminating CEFM and achieving broader development and gender equality goals.

Background:

Child Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) is the violation of human rights and an unsafe exercise that unreasonably affects especially women and girls globally, preventing them from living their lives free from all forms of violence. Cultural traditions and customs, economic hardship, educational backwardness and social pressure from within the community to marry daughters before attaining puberty are the major reasons for prevalence of child marriage. Child marriage leads to health hazards (poor maternal and child health outcomes, high rates of unwanted pregnancy and pregnancy termination, early childbearing or teenage pregnancy, risks of depression, sexually transmitted infections, low birth weight, and high rates of morbidity and stunting, infant and maternal mortality), denial of personal freedom, poor education, less social development skill and domestic violence.

The implications of early marriage are negative for both boys and girls but it has more devastating effects on girls which need to be understood. To curb this the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) came into action in 2006 replacing Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) which declares child marriage is a marriage where either the woman is below the age of 18 years or the man is below the age of 21 years.

Many UN agencies lead global programmes to End Child Marriage advocate and support practical, rights and evidence based actions to end child marriage and promote gender equality and the empowerment of adolescent girls. Now specific efforts are under way to link these efforts for the implementation and monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5.3 to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations. Still child marriage persists in most part of the nation India and Odisha is no exception.

Review of Literature:

Scholars It was believed that the practice of Child Marriages in India was there in 600 AD under the influence of the writings of Dharm-Sutras and Smritis. Child marriage is a type of forced marriage, as minors are incapable of giving their informed consent. According to the UNs, forced marriage is ‘a marriage that takes place without the free or valid consent of one or both of the partners and involves either physical or emotional duress’ (Thomas, 2009).

Cultural factors play important role in perpetuating early marriage. Marrying a girl early gives a family assurance that she will enter marriage as a virgin, averting the shame in cases of premarital pregnancy (Dagne 1994; Mathur *et al.*, 2006; Schuler *et al.*, 2006). It is the parent’s primary duty to get their daughters married early and also having an elderly unmarried daughter means a loss of social status as well as it will charge additional monetary costs to the family (Bhat and Halli, 1999).

Early marriage is associated with low levels of education and often ends a girl’s chances of furthering her education (Blackburn *et al.*, 1993; Klepinger *et al.*, 1999; Lloyd and Mensch, 2008). Education can increase a girl’s aspirations by broadening her perspective on the world and presenting her with work opportunities and other alternatives (Jejeebhoy, 1995; Yabiku, 2005). , so they are not able to get their basic rights.

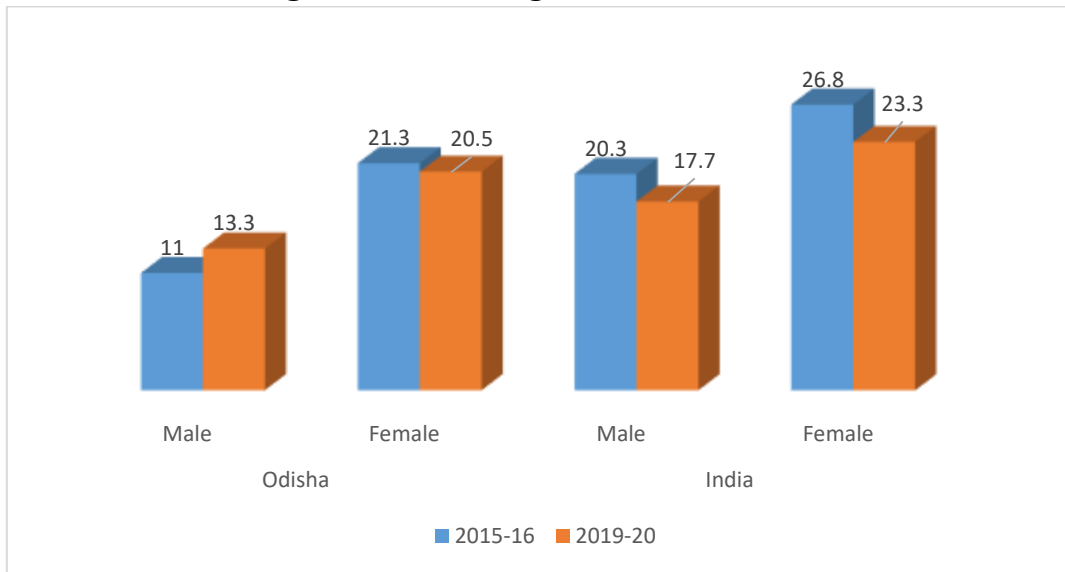
According to UNICEF (2016), poverty is often a major contributor to child marriage. By marrying a girl child off early, is no longer a drain on family resources. Parents prefer to do less expense on daughters, which mean less expense in their education, health and nutrition that lead to their dependence on men. Studies have shown that the size of dowry payments is positively correlated to the age of the bride, suggesting that it may be more expensive for parents to marry an older daughter (Chowdhury, 2010, Bajracharya and Amin, 2010)

Most of the literature showed that social norms, illiteracy and poverty are the major contributor to the Child Marriage.

Child Marriage in Odisha and India:

Odisha is in better position as compared to National level in case of Child Marriage. Female Child Marriage is more than Male Child Marriage at both State and National level, which need to be addressed (Fig 1). It is quite surprising that the male child marriage increased in Odisha from 11percent to 13.3 percent in between the period 2015-16 and 2019-20.

Fig 1: Child Marriage in Odisha vs. India

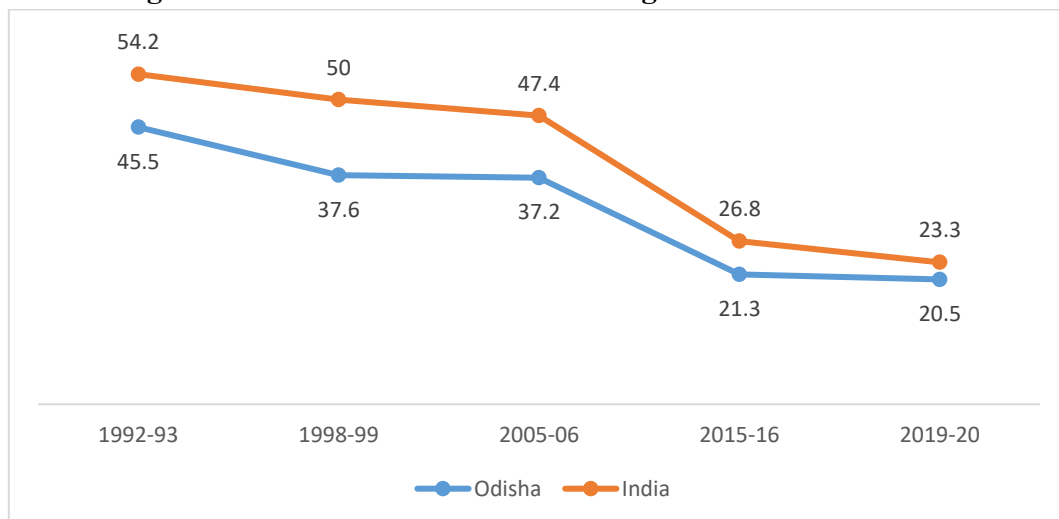


Source: NFHS

Note: NFHS Survey Data: Women age 20- 24 years married before age 18 years and Men age 25-29 years married before age 21 years.

Female Child Marriage has reduced from 45.5 percent to 20.5 percent at State level as against 54.2 percent to 23.3 percent at National level from the year 1992-93 to 2019-20. The rate of reduction is less in Odisha in comparison to national average. (25 percentage point for the State and 31 percentage point for India during the period from 1992-93 to 2019-20).

Fig 2: Trend of Female Child Marriage in Odisha and India



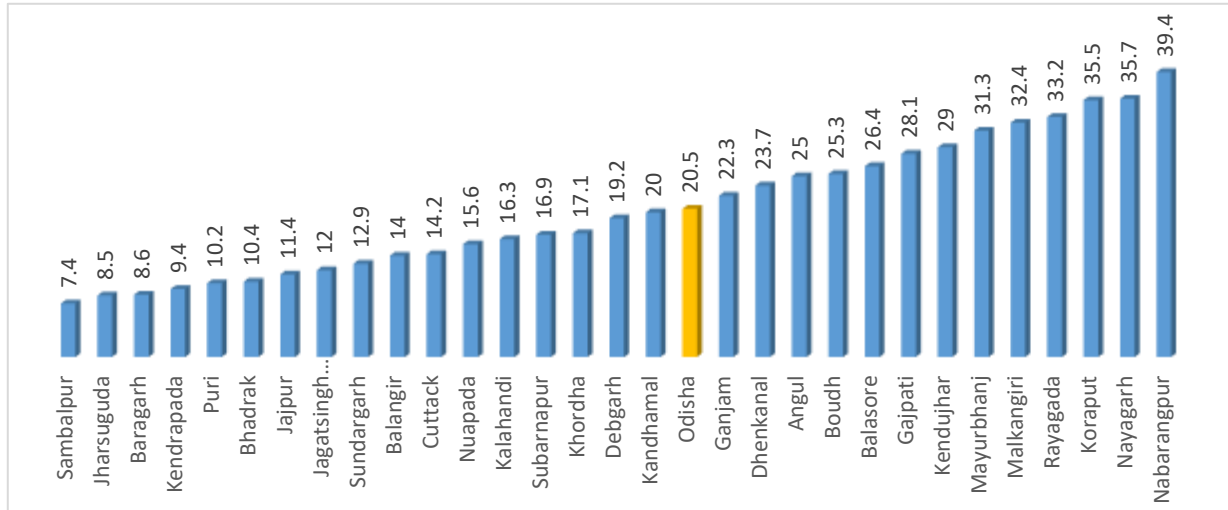
Source: NFHS Reports

District wise Status of Female Child Marriage in Odisha:

The incidence of Child Marriage is very high in almost half of the districts. Nabarangpur is the highest (39.4 percent) and Sambalpur is the lowest (7.4 percent) in female child marriage in the State in 2019-20. Districts like Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Mayurbhanj, Koraput, Rayagada and Nayagarh have recorded

more than 30 percent of Female Child Marriage. Including the above Beside the above districts, the districts Ganjam, Dhenkanal, Angul, Boudh, Balasore, Gajapati, Kendujhar have greater percentage of female child marriage than the State average.

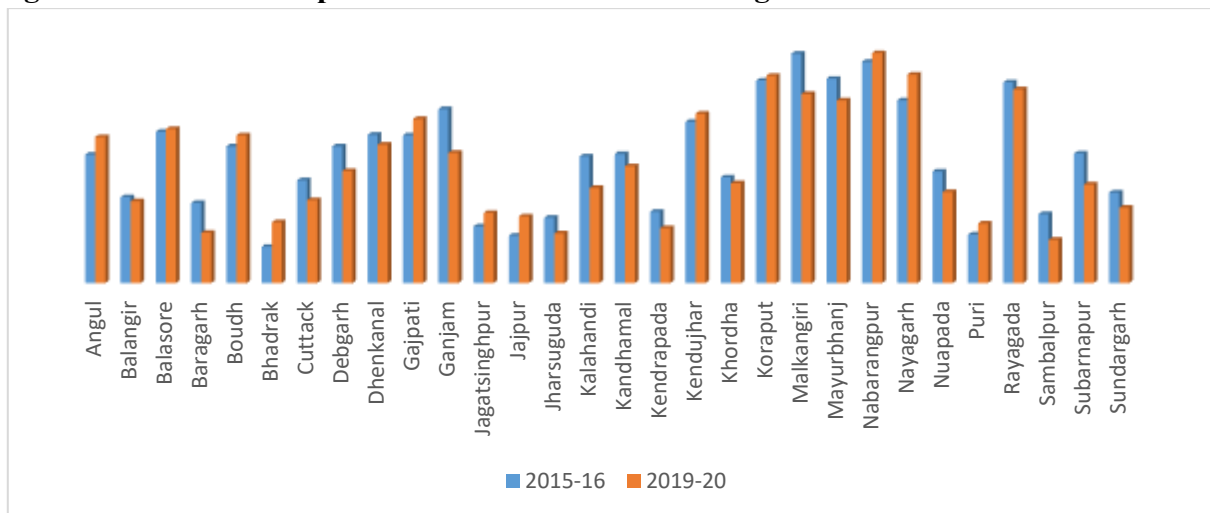
Fig 3: District-wise Percentage of Female Child Marriage in Odisha, 2019-20



Source: NFHS 5

It is a matter of concern that even if we are in the process of inclusive development, instead of reduction in such social stigma, in many districts of Odisha female child marriage is increased.

Fig 4: District wise comparison of Female Child Marriage in between 2015-16 and 2019-20

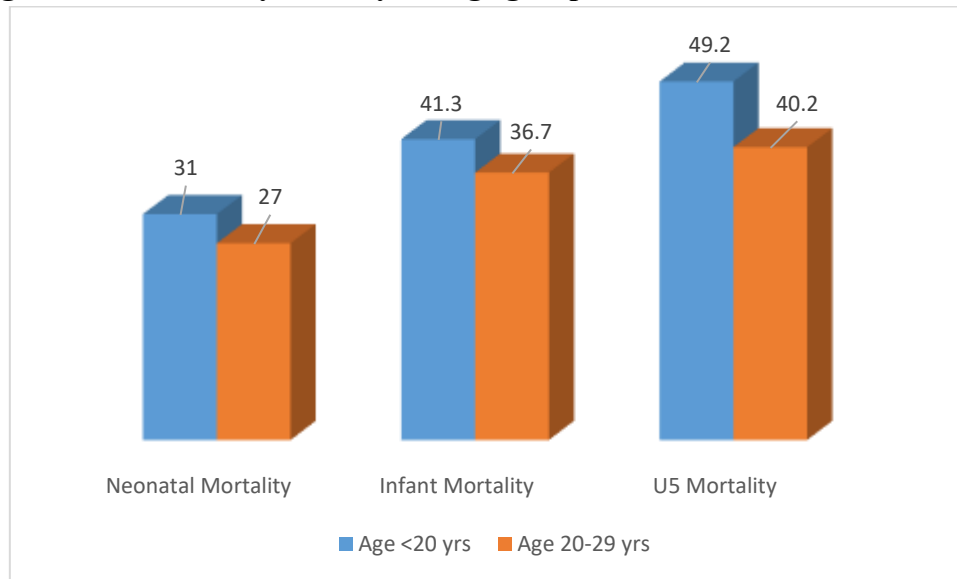


Source: NFHS

Child Marriage and Health:

Children born to mothers under age 20 have more delivery complications leads to high child mortality. It is found that neo-natal, infant and under five mortality rates are 27 percent, 36.7 percent, 40.2 percent for mothers in the age group 20-29 years while it is 31 percent, 41.3 percent, 49.2 percent for the mothers less than age 20 years respectively.

Fig 5: Child Mortality rates by the age group of mothers in Odisha: 2019-20



Source: NFHS 5

Child Marriage and Education:

In our society families believe that investing in a girls' education is waste of resources since it will only benefit her husband's household, and not the family of origin. As societal norm, girls are married off to the groom's family and as a consequence they drop out from school.

In case of Odisha it is found that the districts with high literacy, have less child marriage with exception for the districts Dhenkanal, Balasore, Nayagarh and Khordha where sex ratio is very low. There is establishment of negative correlation between literacy and child marriage (**Correlation value= -0.62**).

Causes:

In most of the countries prevalence of gender inequality where girls are considered inferior to men and treated as commodities. They have less access to education and low social, political and economic status. Child marriage has existed for centuries, mainly because of tradition and due to poverty. According to a report by Girls Not Brides, "poverty is one of the most powerful drivers of the harmful practice in the country. Girls are thought of as an economic burden by parents who believe they will be more financially secure once their daughters are married off and out of their responsibility. Poor families want to reduce the number of children to feed, clothe and educate". Particularly in rural areas or where prospects for girls are few, the practice of early marriage has rising. As the girls have no decision making options, they have no say in the matter and guardians or other family members took the decision.

Often girls are married early to provide protection, security and the support of a male guardian. Families may agree to child marriage because of community pressures and norms. Sometimes children who refuse to marry or choose a marriage partner against the wishes of their family may be punished or even killed.

- Poverty encourages the occurrence of Child marriage. Parents are too poor to pay for the girl's upbringing, and marriage means one less mouth to feed. Moreover, there is existence of poor education and no confirmed jobs for women.
- Parents have to pay higher dowries or accept lower bride prices for older girls. Potential grooms, or their families, prefer young brides. Now a days family members are compelled to fulfil desires of their

children to marry in early age (especially in urban area).

- In addition, early marriage of a girl also allows parents to reduce family expenses as they found investing in their son's feeding, clothing and education is more worthwhile investment.
- Illiteracy among people encourages child marriage in the region and makes people victims of many illusionary beliefs. Education empowers women and makes them aware about the consequences of Child Marriage. Due to lack of proper education, they become dependent and often feel marriage is the solution of their problem.

Consequences:

Child Marriage leads to early age pregnancy which causes enormous physical and mental issues for women. Female victims of Child marriage become labourer after their Marriage to support their husband's family economically. Eventually, this lead to discrimination, domestic violence, trafficking and many other issues. It impacts on young people personal freedom, life expectancy, discrimination, and gender violence.

Denial of Personal Freedom

It is known fact that societies which impose such marriages typically give low status to girls and women and the violation of a girl's basic rights at the moment of marriage is a way of reinforcing violations throughout her life cycle (ICRW, 2011; Population Council, 2011).

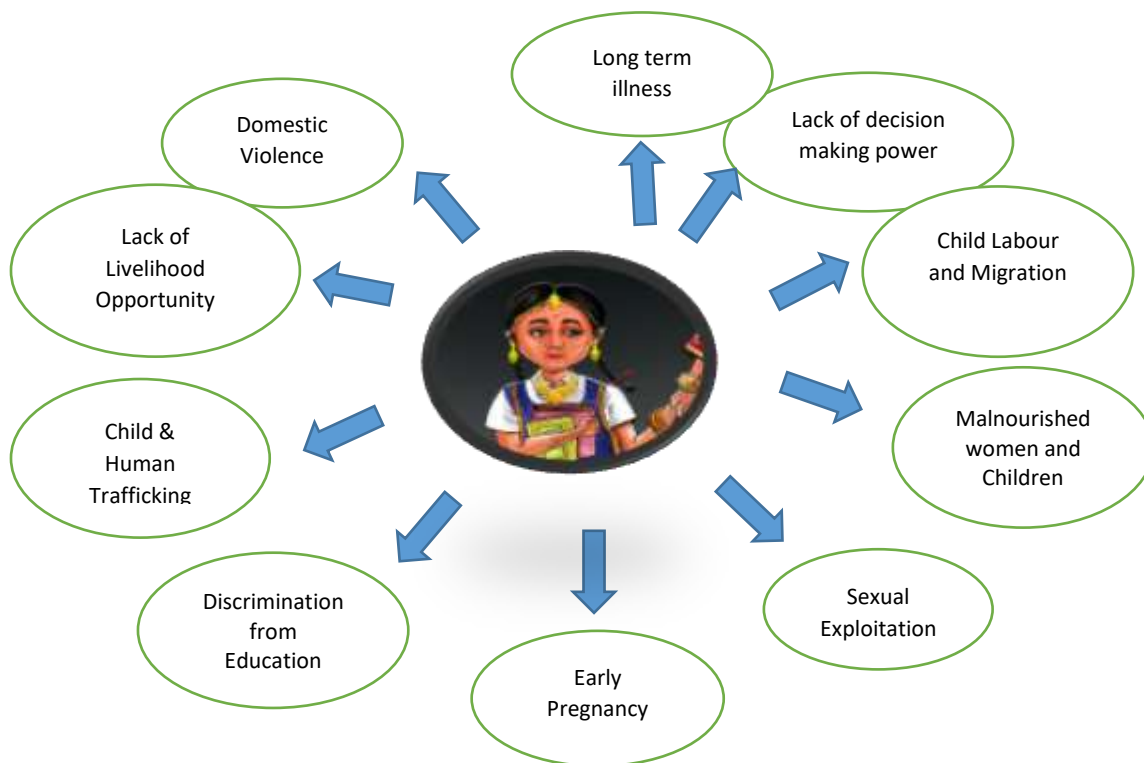
Health Consequences

Child marriage is also associated with high fertility and poor maternal and child health outcomes, including high rates of unwanted pregnancy and pregnancy termination, early childbearing (teenage pregnancy) and bigger family size (Adhikari, 2003; Godha et al., 2013; Raj et al., 2009). It also increases the risks of depression, sexually transmitted infections, cervical cancer, malaria, obstetric fistula, and maternal mortality (Fisher et al., 2011; Goli, et al., 2015; Nour, 2009; Santhya, 2011).

Studies have also indicated that children of adolescent mothers have poorer birth outcomes, including low birth weight, and high rates of morbidity and stunting, as compared to children of older mothers (Chen et al. 2007, Gilbert et al. 2009). Children of adolescent mothers start their lives with deprivations and disadvantages, thus continuing the cycle of poverty and relative deprivation. The children of very young mothers are prone to health risks, are underweight (Goli et al., 2015), educationally disadvantaged (Mc Cleary-Sills et al., 2015), experience restricted public participation and have poor social skill development (Alam, 2007).

Violence

India has the highest level of domestic violence among women married by the age of 18 with a rate of 67% (UNICEF, 2005). The "unequal power dynamics" between young brides and their older spouses also results in their being more likely to be victims of marital rape, compared to girls who marry at late ages (Jensen and Thornton, 2003; Nour, 2006). Researchers in India found that girls who married young were more likely to have experienced physical and sexual violence in their marriages and were more likely to accept wife beating (Santhya et al., 2010).



Recommendations:

Child marriage is a serious issue which has severe consequences on individual and society as a whole. Even if with the legal provisions, acts, to prevent this matter there is need of:

- Campaigns should be launched for prevention of child marriage. Awareness and sensitization programmes including media campaigns are needed for creating an environment of delaying marriage and empowering adolescent girls.
- Mobilize faith-based community leaders to prevent CEFM and protect the rights of girls in their communities.
- Dropout rate to be zero and promote girls to going back school and discourage early and forced marriage.
- Increase in socio-economic condition through increase economic opportunities
- Aware about the health hazardousness due to early marriage.
- Availability of protection services and psycho social support to girls exposed to or at extreme risk of violence.
- Knowledge about Government interventions for education, livelihood, health etc.

Child marriage can be curbed with the interventions at each stage of a young child's life, ensuring they are equipped with the right knowledge, skills, and decision-making power. More and more better Life Options Programs to help adolescent girls and boys to make better life choices around education, rights, livelihood, sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, and civic responsibility.