

## **The Problem of Child Marriage: A Case Study of Women Labourers in Goalpara District, Assam**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Marriage as a universal social phenomenon refers to a system under which union of a man and a woman has been given social sanction as husband and wife. But marriage creates a lot of problems for the society when it has taken place before an appropriate age of the person. Marriage before an appropriate age which is known as child marriage affects both the girl and boy by depriving them from childhood, and the society as a whole. Although the law to restrict the practice of child marriage in India was enacted before independence, the incidences of child marriage have still existed at this modern era. India is still witnessing the practice of child marriages among the people of backward classes.*

*Therefore, the present study is chosen to explore the causes and consequences of child marriage among women labourers with special reference to Goalpara district of Assam. The area for the present study is chosen based on the fact that it is one of the highest child marriage prevalence districts of Assam particularly among the labour class of people. The people of labour class are regarded as most backward classes of people and the district is facing the problem of child marriage in its development.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Child marriage, women, labour class, causes and consequences.*

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Date of Submission: 20-10-2019

Date of acceptance: 03-11-2019

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Throughout the world marriage is one of the universal social institutions and a necessary part of our Indian social system. In simple words, marriage is a system under which union of a man and a woman has been given social sanction as husband and wife. But it creates various social problems, if it has taken place before the person reaches an appropriate age. Child marriage affects both girls and boys, and deprives children from their childhood. Defining the age in which a person is to be considered a child is a constant debate in our India. Biologically childhood is the stage between infancy and adulthood. The census of India considers children to be any person below the age of fourteen years. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 defines a child as a person who has not completed fourteen years of age. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 states that a male has not reached majority until he is 21 years of age and a female has not reached majority until she is 18 years of age.

The term used by the international community for child marriage are 'early marriage' or 'forced marriage'. The UNICEF defines child marriage as a formal marriage or informal union before 18 years of age. UN Women has proposed that child marriage can be defined as a forced marriage because they believe children under age of 18 are incapable of giving a legally valid consent. In our Indian context, The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 defines "child marriage" means a marriage, or a marriage about to be solemnized, to which either of the contracting parties is a child; and child for purposes of marriage is defined based on gender of the person - if a male, it is 21 years of age, and if a female, 18 years of age. Thus, we can consider child marriage as a violation of child rights.

Child marriage is a social problem that exists because of socio-economic, cultural and regional factors. It not only affects the persons involved in it, but also affects the society and the nation as a whole. Goalpara district is one of the highest child marriage prevalence districts of Assam particularly among the labour class of people. The term labour class means those classes of people who earn their livelihood by doing physical labour. Therefore, the present study has tried to explore about how poor economic condition and lower educational level of parents leads to child marriages, and the impact of child marriage on the development of society with a case study of women labourers in Goalpara district.

### **II. OBJECTIVES**

The present study has been done with the following two main objectives-

1. To find out the causes of child marriage among women.

2. To examine the impact of child marriage on women in Goalpara district.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used for the present study is descriptive and explorative based on primary and secondary data. The secondary data is drawn from books, journals, official records and other printed materials available related to the study. But to acquire in-depth information both structured and unstructured Interview Schedule has been used by taking 40 respondents as sample size residing within the Goalpara town. As the present study is based on women labourers, it includes 20 daily-wage labourers and other 20 home-based labourers i.e., domestic workers. Moreover, the application of observation technique is also used during the study.

### IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

The present study focuses on Goalpara district because it is one of the district of Assam where child marriages are more prevalent. It was the second highest district of Assam in case of child marriage according to 2001 census report. The Annual Health Survey report of 2010-11 revealed that there are ten districts in Assam which have higher rates of marriage than the state and national averages. It is about 39.4% of girls in Assam are married off before they attain the age of 18 years. According to the 2011 census, the district has a population of 1,08,183 and the literacy is 67.37% which is less than state's literacy rate of 72.19%. The sex ratio in the district is 964 females for every 1000 males. Within the district child marriages are still continue despite of various legislative measures and incidents are more in char (riverine) areas of the district mostly among Muslim community. Now a days, the incidence of child marriages are rising according to District Child Protection Committee (DCPC). Child marriages are common among the people belonging to backward classes of society and most of the victims are girls whom found to be as labourers of the society. So, the present study is an attempt to find out the causes and consequences of child marriage among the labour classes of the society.

#### Causes of Child Marriage

The main causes of early marriage according to the respondents i.e., women labourers are classified as in the following table-

**Table 1: Causes of Child Marriage**

Causes	No of Respondents	Percentage
Educational level	5	12.5
Economic condition	8	20
Social custom	11	27.5
Burden	16	40
Total	40	100

Source: Primary Data

**Burden of Family-** The above mentioned table shows that the main reason of child marriage is treating girl child as burden for family and the society. The primary data indicates that about 40% of child marriages are taken place due to the fear of any kind of sexual assault which bound the family to treat their girl child as burden.

**Social Custom-** In another cause, it is a social custom of society to married off the girls as soon as possible. The table shows that about 27.5% child marriages are taken place due to the long standing practices of social customs.

**Economic Condition-** One of the reasons of child marriage is the poor economic condition of the labour classes of society. As most of the women labourers reported that treating girls as burden is the reason of child marriage, it is about 20% labourers assumes that poor economic condition also leads to early marriages. It is like they don't search a better groom for their daughters instead of that they try to get rid of the burdens, responsibilities and mostly from the expenses of girl child. It means girls having economically poor family background are the most vulnerable to child marriage.

**Lack of Education-** Another cause of child marriage is illiteracy of the parents which leads them to early marriages of their daughters. It is about 12.5% respondents said that lack of awareness regarding appropriate age of marriage and legal provisions that existed for prohibition of child marriage due to illiteracy is the main cause of child marriages among them.

#### Consequences of Child Marriage

Child marriages have long term negative impacts not only on the girls but also on the development of a healthy society. It is also a human rights violation that deprives a girl from her full potentiality in educational

and economic field, and leading to a dangerous cycle of oppression. However, the present study have revealed the consequences of child marriage among the women labourers as-

**Education-** Marriage of girls at an early age automatically means deprivation from getting educated. Educational level of a girl always determines her marriage at early age and it is a fact that the more educated a girl is, the less likely she is to marry early. It indicates that child marriage is associated with lower educational level of girls. In this present study, the educational status of women labourers who married at an early age are found to be as following table. The table shows that more than half of the respondents i.e., 62.5% are literate but up to the primary level and the reason of discontinuing their education is child marriage. The table also depicts that 27.5% respondents are illiterate and only 10% women had attained up to the secondary level. The lower level of education as found from the primary data reveals that the responsibilities including household works, caring of in-laws, pregnancy, raising children and other social restrictions for married women prevent them from getting proper education.

**Table 2: Educational Status of Respondents**

Education	No of Respondents	Percentage
Illiteracy	11	27.5
Primary	25	62.5
Secondary	4	10
Graduate	0	0
Total	40	100

Source: Primary Data

**Maternal Health-** Early marriages leading to early pregnancies often causes to problems on women's health. In the present study, more than half of the women give birth before 20 and had faced lots of health problems. Mothers at the young age have to face pregnancy related stress, baby blues symptoms, anemia, urinary tract infection, difficulties during labor and responsibility of child rearing. The following table clearly reveals the age at child birth of women labourers in which more than 50% of women labourers have given birth before they aged 20. It is only 17.5% of respondents have given birth after 20 but it is because before 20 they have faced miscarriages.

**Table 3: Age at Child Birth**

Age	No of Respondents	Percentage
15-18	19	47.5
18-21	14	35
21-24	7	17.5
Above 24	0	0
Total	40	100

Source: Primary Data

**Infant Health-** A baby born to a young mother between 15-19 years old is at high risk of infant mortality than a baby born to a mother of aged 20 or its above. Moreover, child born to a young mother have low birth weight, premature birth, trouble in breathing, retarded development, etc., than those born to older mothers. The following table has tried to depict the picture of infant health which reveals that about 22.5% of babies had died during delivery due to the incapable physical growth of young mothers' to give birth. It is about 12.5% and 27.5% of young mothers have premature birth and underweight. Further, most of the children i.e., 37.5% of such young mothers are suffering from the problem of retarded development in comparison to other children.

**Table 4: Infant Health Condition**

Infant Health	No of Respondents	Percentage
Infant mortality	9	22.5
Premature birth	5	12.5
Underweight	11	27.5
Retarded development	15	37.5
Total	40	100

Source: Primary Data

**Economic Condition-** The lower level of their education leads to lower economic condition as they deprives from adequate means of economic opportunities. The victims of child marriage are depriving from becoming economically independent due to their lack of educational qualification or skills. It compels them to live within

the cycle of poverty with their low income and excluding them from higher level of economic opportunities. As the present study focuses on impact of child marriage among women labourers, the following table has tried to depict the lower income of the victims. It reveals that 50% women have the income of Rs.4000-6000 and 30% have earned only Rs.2000-4000 which is very difficult for them to manage household expenditure. It is only 20% women have the earnings of Rs.6000-8000, which is also not sufficient as they are becoming the only income source of the family.

**Table 5: Monthly Income of Respondents**

Monthly Income	No of Respondents	Percentage
2000-4000	12	30
4000-6000	20	50
6000-8000	8	20
Above 8000	0	0
Total	40	100

Source: Primary Data

Thus, child marriage has negative impact not only on the women alone but also on the children, the family and the society as a whole. Even it is found that early marriages of girls are also more prone to be the victim of domestic violence. It was found in the present study that the respondents are now aware of the appropriate legal age for marriage, but still they are concentrating on marriage of their daughters as soon as possible. It is because of their social customs and some socio-cultural restrictions they are continuing the tradition of marriage of the girl child at a very young age.

## V. CONCLUSION

The problem of child marriage is prevailing in almost all parts of the world and is becoming one of the major social issues in present human society. Even after 72 years of India's independence and several legal provisions to restrict early marriages, child marriage is continuing to contribute as barrier in the development of society. It is not only barrier to development of society but also violation of human rights of the girls to reach their full potentiality. Therefore, it is an urgent need to solve the age-old problem of child marriage from its very roots and creating an environment for the girls to participate in all decision-making process of their life.

As there are some socio-cultural restrictions to contribute the continuation of child marriage, parents and community leaders of such societies are to be educated about negative impacts of child marriage. They should be educated enough to understand that the social belief to keep girls safe, secure and economically protected by early marriage is actually endangers girls' physical and mental health.

The problem of child marriage can be restricted by keeping girls in school and educating them to speak up for themselves. Education as a powerful weapon to bring any kind of change in society is the keys to empowerment of girls. An educated girl is more able to stand up and say "No" to child marriage than uneducated one. Moreover, education provides the knowledge and skills to engage in better employment sector which can break the cycle of poverty of the family. It can also prevent child marriages which occur due to the poor economic condition of families.

Therefore, in conclusion we can say that the social injustice of child marriage cannot be removed by legal provisions and governmental efforts alone, the efforts at the root level of the problem is also very essential.

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Rizuwana Sultana" The Problem of Child Marriage: A Case Study of Women Labourers in Goalpara District, Assam" *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 08, no. 10, 2019, pp. 01-04