

EDUCATE TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

EXPLORING LINKAGES AND ROLE OF EDUCATION
IN ERADICATING CHILD MARRIAGES



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Key Highlights

- India has made tremendous progress in recent times and is well on its way to achieving the tipping point of ending child marriage by 2030.
- The Child Marriage Free India campaign, a coalition of 161 civil society organisations across 265 districts in 17 states/UTs, in 2022-23 has successfully prevented 59,364 child marriages.
- Of these, in 9,551 child marriage cases, legal interventions such as the registration of FIR, injunction orders by courts, orders by child welfare committees, and undertakings in the presence of government officials have been initiated.
- With the aim of eradicating child marriages from the state by 2026, the government of Assam has taken several steps, including registration of 5,225 FIRs under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA) and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO). The state government has recently repealed the Assam Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Act, 1935, to achieve its goal. These measures have led to a 33 percent decrease in maternal deaths (from 766 in 2021-22 to 510 in 2022-23) and a 15 percent decrease in child deaths (from 7,872 in 2021-22 to 6,718 in 2022-23)*.
- At all India level, the proportion of ever married girls in the 15-17 age bracket declined from 9.96% in 2011 (Census 2011) to 4.07% in 2021 (NFHS-5), indicating a positive trend towards the eradication of girl child marriages.
- Across all geographical zones, as the level of female literacy increases, the occurrence of child marriages decreases, and vice versa. However, a couple of states show a slightly different result. For instance, in West Bengal, despite a healthy female literacy rate (77%), the child marriage prevalence is high (42%).
- The existing RTE Act should be modified to include all children up to the age of 18. It will ensure the right to free and compulsory education for all children, especially girls, who are above 14 years of age but below 18 years of age.

A substantial proportion of marriages stopped were from Bihar (31%). In addition to the extensive programmatic intervention, this might also be the consequence of the directive from the Government of Bihar in 2022, which said that if a village reports a child marriage, the "mukhiya" (village head) will be held accountable for the illegal act and proceedings will be started to remove him/her from office.

* <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/maternal-child-deaths-decline-in-assam-after-crackdown-on-under-age-marriage-chief-minister-himanta-biswa-sarma/cid/1986405>

The Context

Early marriage of girl children is still a strongly ingrained social norm in many developing nations, with serious implications for both the personal well-being of girls and the overall development of society. Particularly in India, early marriage remains a prevailing issue, compromising girls' educational opportunities, health, and overall empowerment. Girl child marriage in India, defined as before attaining 18 years, is associated with a multitude of adverse outcomes for girls, including limited educational attainment, compromised physical and mental health, increased risk of domestic violence, and economic vulnerability. Moreover, it perpetuates the intergenerational cycle of poverty and deepens gender inequalities within society. Despite the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA) and increased awareness, it is persisting across various states in India. To address this complex challenge, policymakers and scholars have increasingly recognised the significance of education as a potent catalyst for transforming the social norms surrounding early marriage.

Previous research has established a strong link between education, particularly female education, and the prevalence of child marriage¹. According to a study by Raj et al. (2014), higher levels of female education are associated with lower rates of child marriage². Similarly, research by Paul (2020) found that girls and young women with secondary and higher educational levels are less likely to be married before the age of 18 years compared to the uneducated ones³.

A 2022 correlation study⁴ comparing the percent of child marriage with the percentage of women's literacy (15-49 years) and percentage of women with 10 or more years of schooling, has also shown that higher the literacy and schooling level among women and better the quality of education, lower the cases of child marriages. For example in Madhya Pradesh, districts like Bhopal, Betul and Raisen that have higher women's literacy and number of years of schooling have a quite low percentage of child marriage at 11.3, 11.2 and 12.6 percent, respectively⁵.

Girls with higher educational attainment or aspirations tend to postpone marriage to improve their chances for a better economic livelihood and independence. Education also tends to expand the aspirations and goals of girls, making them less inclined to settle for child marriage and motherhood⁶. More educated women are expected to delay marriage longer than less educated women because

¹ Jain S, Kurz K (2007), New insights on preventing child marriage: A global analysis of factors and programs. Washington DC, https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lsidocs/icrw_child_marriage_0607.pdf

² Raj A, McDougal L, Silverman JG, et al (2014), Cross-sectional time series analysis of associations between education and girl child marriage in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, 1991-2011, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4159189/#pone.0106210-Jain1>

³ Paul, Pintu (2020), Child Marriage Among Girls in India: Prevalence, Trends and Socio-Economic Correlates, Indian Journal of Human Development, Volume 14, Issue 2, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0973703020950263>

⁴ The Week (2022), Better the education, lower the cases of child marriage: CRY correlation study, <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2022/09/08/better-the-education--lower-the-cases-of-child-marriage--cry-cor.html>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ ICRW (2015), District-level study on child marriage in India: What do we know about the prevalence, trends, and patterns?, [District-level-study-on-Child-Marriage-in-India.pdf \(icrw.org\)](https://www.icrw.org/files/publications/District-level-study-on-Child-Marriage-in-India.pdf)

education raises the opportunity costs of marriage and childbearing by giving women other options in life and allows girls to put off marriage for an additional year for every year spent in school⁷.

In highly patriarchal societies, the husband's educational attainment is likely to be as much as that of the wife, if not more, in deciding the marital age of girls. Men from lower socio-economic strata are more likely to want much younger wives, who are generally more willing or moulded easily, to adhere to traditional female roles⁸.

The education of girls holds immense potential for tackling the persistent issue of child marriages while simultaneously safeguarding them from multifaceted forms of exploitation and promoting their overall well-being. By providing girls with access to education, societies can disrupt the cycle of child marriages. Education equips girls with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their lives, empowering them to resist societal pressures and pursue their aspirations. Additionally, education acts as a protective shield, equipping girls with the awareness and critical thinking abilities necessary to identify and defend against various forms of exploitation, such as child marriage, human trafficking, and sexual abuse. Furthermore, education has far-reaching impacts on girls' health, equipping them with essential knowledge about reproductive health, thereby promoting a healthier future for themselves and their children.

Objective and Data Source

Drawing on a comprehensive review of existing literature, this research article aims to investigate the linkages and emphasize the critical role of education in mitigating the prevalence of early marriage among girls in India.

For this paper, multiple data sources were utilised to examine the linkages between education and the age at marriage for girls in India. Apart from review of published articles and reports, the data sources used were the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), the Census 2011, and the most recent projected population totals published by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Registrar General of India.

The Child Marriage Free India Campaign

Considering that survivors of child marriage, child sexual abuse, and child trafficking cannot be fully rehabilitated without access to justice, the Access to Justice Programme is being implemented, giving thousands of children in India their right to be heard and bringing the perpetrators of violence to justice. It is a grant making initiative that funds partner organisations at national and local levels to deliver justice

⁷ ibid
⁸⁸ ibid

and rehabilitation of child survivors in India. The pilot phase of the programme commenced in August 2021 and continued till the end of March 2023.

The main phase of the programme started on May 1, 2023. To bring about the behaviour change required to have a lasting and sustainable impact on child protection, the programme during this phase has been working to ensure implementation of current policies, schemes, and laws in three thematic areas. This phase of the Access to Justice Programme is operational in 265 districts spread over 17 States and UTs. The Programme is implemented in partnership with 160 civil society organisations.

Child Marriage Free India (CMFI) is a nationwide campaign, led by women activists, village leaders and the partner organisations. The intensive programme activities to address the issue of child marriage are active in 31,150 villages. CMFI is working to attain the tipping point of child marriage, after which society will not accept this evil practice and that will happen when the prevalence of child marriage is brought down to 5.5 percent by 2030, from the current national prevalence rate of 23.3 percent.

In the first nine months of programme implementation, a total of 9,551 child marriages were stopped through legal interventions such as registration of FIR, injunction orders by courts, orders by Child Welfare Committees and undertakings in the presence of government officials. Further, another 49,813 child marriages were stopped through counselling of parents, and awareness programmes about the laws and the adverse impact of child marriage on the girl child.

Recent Evidence from States

The NFHS-5 household survey information has been used to find out the relationship between the female literacy rate and the prevalence of child marriage. Percentages of women aged 20-24 who were married before attainment of legal age at marriage have been used to assess the prevalence of child marriage across states/UTs.

A careful comparison of the data indicates that states with higher female literacy rates tend to have lower prevalence rates of child marriage. In comparison, states with lower female literacy rates tend to have higher prevalence rates of child marriage. For instance, in the Southern Zone, Kerala stands out with a high female literacy rate of 96 percent and a low child marriage prevalence of 6 percent. Similarly, Mizoram in the North-Eastern Zone shows a high female literacy rate of 93 percent and a relatively low child marriage prevalence of 8 percent.

Conversely, states like Bihar in the Eastern Zone have a low female literacy rate of 61 percent and a high child marriage prevalence of 41 percent. Similarly, Rajasthan in the Northern Zone has a lower female literacy rate of 64 percent and a relatively high child marriage prevalence of 25 percent.

Table 1. Female Literacy Rates and Child Marriage Prevalence Across States in India

Zones	States/UTs	Female Literacy Rate (%)	Child Marriage Prevalence (%)
Northern Zone	Chandigarh	86.6	9.7
	Haryana	73.8	12.5
	Himachal Pradesh	81.0	5.4
	Jammu & Kashmir	70.1	4.5
	Ladakh	67.9	2.5
	NCT Delhi	83.7	9.9
	Punjab	77.2	8.7
	Rajasthan	63.5	25.4
	Uttarakhand	75.2	9.8
North-Eastern Zone	Arunachal Pradesh	71.2	18.9
	Assam	78.2	31.8
	Manipur	84.0	16.3
	Meghalaya	85.9	16.9
	Mizoram	93.2	7.9
	Nagaland	85.2	5.6
	Sikkim	83.7	10.8
	Tripura	81.8	40.1
Eastern Zone	Bihar	61.1	40.8
	Jharkhand	64.5	32.2
	Odisha	71.5	20.5
	West Bengal	76.8	41.6
Central Zone	Chhattisgarh	69.3	12.0
	Madhya Pradesh	67.5	23.1
	Uttar Pradesh	67.5	15.8
Western Zone	Dadra & Nagar haveli and Daman & Diu	74.4	26.6
	Goa	88.9	5.9
	Gujarat	72.9	21.8
	Maharashtra	79.7	21.9
Southern Zone	Andaman & Nicobar Island	83.5	16.2
	Andhra Pradesh	65.6	29.3
	Karnataka	73.0	21.2
	Kerala	95.5	6.3
	Lakshadweep	93.0	1.3
	Puducherry	84.6	6.5
	Tamil Nadu	80.4	12.8
	Telangana	61.0	23.5

Source: National Family Health Survey-5

However, there are instances where this association seems weak. For example, West Bengal in the Eastern Zone has a relatively high female literacy rate of 77 percent but still shows a very high child marriage prevalence of 42 percent. Similarly, Tripura in the North-Eastern Zone shows a higher female literacy rate of 82 percent but still has a high child marriage prevalence of 40 percent. These exceptions suggest that while female literacy rates may play a significant role, other socio-economic factors and cultural practices may also influence the prevalence of child marriage in these regions.

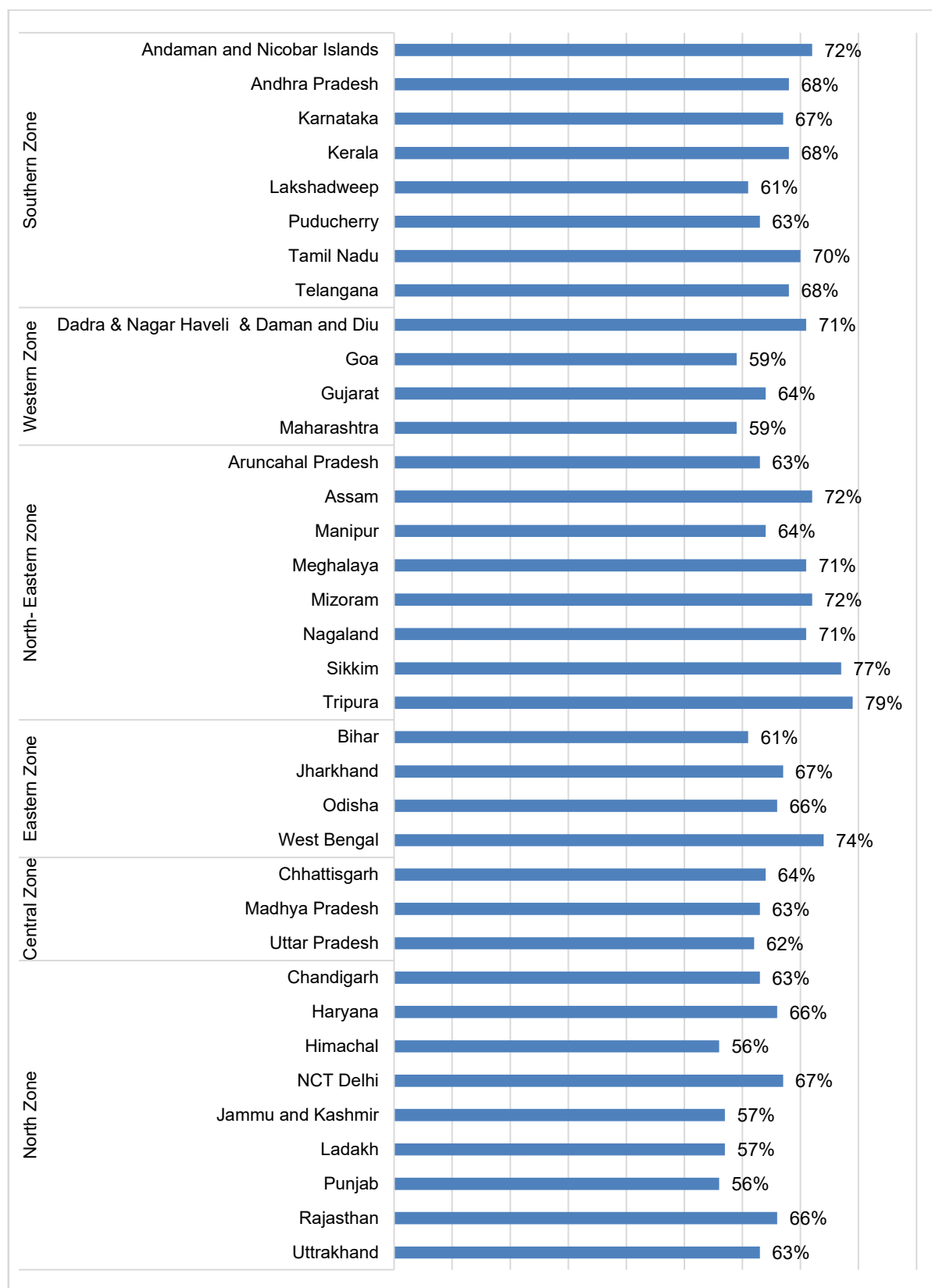
A statistical analysis was conducted in order to examine the correlation between the female literacy rate and the prevalence of child marriage in different geographical zones. The results indicate a significant inverse relationship between these variables in each zone. Specifically, as the level of female literacy increases, the occurrence of child marriages decreases and vice versa.

Identification of Most Vulnerable Girls

The Census 2011 recorded that a total of approximately 52 lakh girl children in India were reported as married. Of these, over 33 lakh were in the age group of 15-17 years old, indicating that two-thirds (65%) of the girl children who were married before reaching the legal age of marriage fell within this age group. Further examination at the state level demonstrates significant variation in these proportions. Specifically, states such as Tripura (79%), West Bengal (74%), and Tamil Nadu (70%) had a relatively high percentage share of married children aged 15-17 out of the total married children, while among the Union Territories, Andaman and Nicobar Islands had a notably high percentage share of 72 percent.

Zone wise the highest percentage share (more than 70%) of ever married girls in the age group of 15-17 years of the total ever married children was found to be among the North Eastern states like Sikkim (77%), Nagaland (77%) Assam (72%), Meghalaya (72%), Mizoram (71%). In southern zone Tamil Nadu (70%), Telangana (68%), Andhra Pradesh (68%) and Karnataka (68%) showed a substantially high percentage share. The north and central zones fare better than other zones with states like Himachal Pradesh (56%), Jammu & Kashmir (57%), Uttarakhand (63%). It is evident from the analysis that girls aged 15-17 years are particularly vulnerable to the practice of child marriage. This could be due to multiple social, cultural, and economic factors, coupled with limited educational opportunities.

Figure 1. Percent share of married children aged 15-17 out of the total married children (below 18 years)



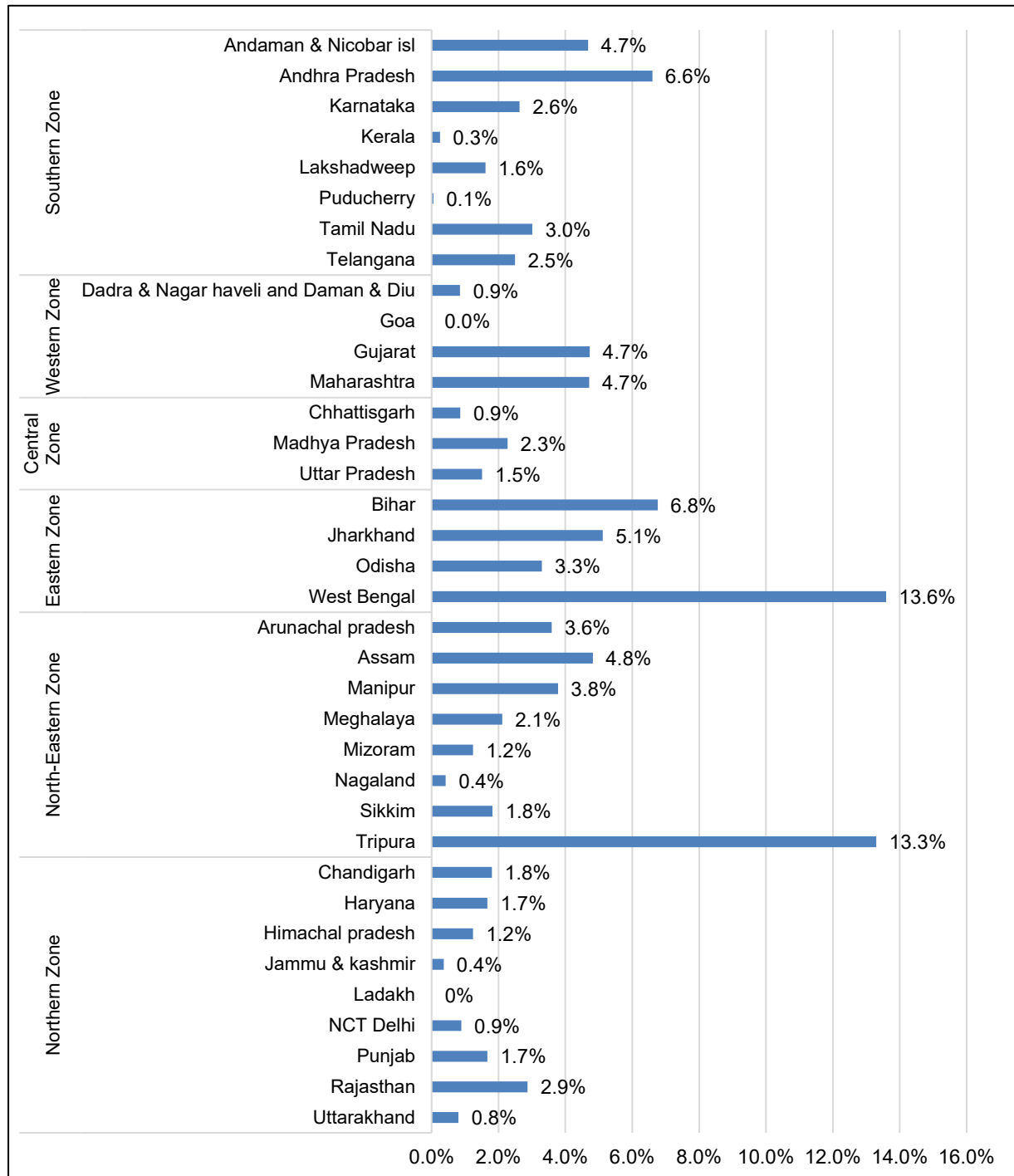
Source: Census 2011

Projected Number of Most Vulnerable Girls

The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, in India provides a justiciable legal framework for children aged 6-14 years for free and compulsory education. However, there is no specific government programme or regulatory framework in place to provide free and mandatory education for children older than 14. This makes children above 14 years of age, especially girls, more vulnerable to various types of exploitation, especially marriage.

In this regard, an estimation has been carried out to find out the number of girls aged 15-17 who are going to be married in 2024. The projected population has been computed using information from the National Commission on Population, Government of India's Report of the Technical Group on Population Projection, and National Health Family Survey-5 (2019-21) as well as Census 2011 population numbers pertaining to girls aged 15-17. The following figure presents the proportion of girls aged 15-17 years who were reported to be married during the NFHS-5 survey.

Figure 2. Percent girls aged 15-17 who were reported to be married during NFHS-5 survey



Source: National Family Health Survey-5

Estimates suggest that in 2024, out of 3.9 Cr. girls in the age group 15-17 years, 16 lakhs would have been married. State wise distribution suggest that a substantial proportion of these married girls will be from West Bengal (14%), Tripura (13%), Bihar (7%) and Andhra Pradesh (7%) collectively accounting for 41 percent.

Table 2. State wise projected number of girls aged 15-17 in 2024

Zone	State/UT	Total Projected Population aged 15-17 in 2024	Approximate number of ever married girls in 2024
	India	3,89,46,964	15,85,141
Northern Zone	Chandigarh	29,870	538
	Haryana	8,58,528	14,337
	Himachal Pradesh	1,95,536	2,425
	Jammu & Kashmir	3,92,078	1,411
	Ladakh	8,002	-
	NCT Delhi	5,72,061	5,091
	Punjab	8,22,454	13,735
	Rajasthan	24,73,790	70,998
	Uttarakhand	3,72,088	2,977
North-Eastern Zone	Arunachal Pradesh	54,418	1,954
	Assam	9,96,295	48,021
	Manipur	97,150	3,672
	Meghalaya	1,13,781	2,401
	Mizoram	37,138	461
	Nagaland	78,373	329
	Sikkim	22,576	411
	Tripura	1,15,736	15,393
Eastern Zone	Bihar	31,64,303	2,13,907
	Jharkhand	10,89,040	55,759
	Odisha	12,99,021	42,868
	West Bengal	27,36,096	3,71,835
Central Zone	Chhattisgarh	9,21,475	7,925
	Madhya Pradesh	25,20,171	57,208
	Uttar Pradesh	79,21,482	1,19,614
Western Zone	Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu	22,401	190
	Goa	33,591	-
	Gujarat	19,10,356	90,360
	Maharashtra	32,44,930	1,52,836
Southern Zone	Andaman & Nicobar Island	10,057	471
	Andhra Pradesh	14,19,379	99,357
	Karnataka	17,55,844	46,179
	Kerala	8,30,594	2,076
	Lakshadweep	19,131	308
	Puducherry	40,342	20
	Tamil Nadu	18,83,194	56,684
	Telangana	9,97,408	19,948

In one of the recent books, "When Children have Children" (Ribhu B., 2024), the author highlighted the importance of providing a monthly stipend of at least INR 1,000 per girl child to sustain their education and deter early marriages. The author's estimates indicate that a yearly additional budget of INR 19,979 Cr., or just 0.4 percent of India's total Union budget, can shield every girl under the age of 18 from the dangers of child marriage and ensure that she has access to education. The girls identified in this paper as the most vulnerable to early marriage are unfortunately not included under the Right to Education (RTE) Act. To effectively support and protect these girls from child marriage, it is imperative to extend the same incentives to them, enabling them to complete their education and reducing their susceptibility to this harmful practice.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Education has been widely acknowledged as a transformative force that enhances individuals' abilities to critically analyse and challenge prevailing social norms, fostering greater autonomy and decision-making power. As such, studies have shown that expanding access to education can significantly contribute to raising the age of marriage for girls, leading to positive socio-economic outcomes and improved gender equality. This paper is expected to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on combatting early marriage and advancing the rights of girls in India, subsequently nurturing a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous society for all.

As evidenced from the analysis of Census 2011, girls aged 15-17 years are particularly vulnerable to the practice of child marriage. This vulnerability stems from a combination of social, cultural, and economic factors. Societal norms and traditional beliefs around gender roles and marriage often perpetuate the notion that girls should be married off early to ensure their protection and honour. Additionally, economic factors such as poverty and a lack of educational opportunities contribute to the high incidence of child marriage, as families may view early marriage as a means to secure economic stability and alleviate financial burdens. The vulnerability of girls aged 15-17 to child marriage highlights the need for comprehensive interventions that address the need for free and compulsory quality education with incentives for girls up to 18 years of age. Along with education, efforts also need to be made to address the underlying social, cultural, and economic factors driving the harmful practice of early girl child marriages in India.

The existing Right to Education (RTE) Act needs to be modified to encompass all children up to the age of 18, with particular emphasis on girls between 14 and 18 years, which is essential for ensuring the comprehensive realisation of the right to free and compulsory education. Extending the Act's coverage to this age group will not only address the critical educational needs of children but will also be an effective tool to eradicate child marriage and elevate the age of marriage in India.

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