India grapples with its child marriage challenge

Indian states are taking a stand against child marriages with some promising results. Their efforts could help inform the new global campaign to end the practice. Patralekha Chatterjee reports.

On a July afternoon in Upparapalli village in the state of Andhra Pradesh, southern India, something remarkable was happening. Inside a classroom, a group of teenage school girls trilled a lilting melody in honour of 15-year-old Savitri Pullakunta, whose marriage had been successfully thwarted by their collective effort. The young girls who had gathered in this school in the Adoni division of Andhra’s Kurnool district were members of a girls’ collective. Such collectives are part of a strategy by UN, governmental, and non-governmental agencies to boost the confidence of teenage girls and to fight child marriage—a practice that continues across the country, particularly in rural backwaters, despite a legal ban.

Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, is a bustling information technology hub. But child marriage persists amid abject poverty—one of the many challenges facing a country focused on stellar economic growth. According to the most recent National Family Health Survey, there has been an overall decline in the percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were married before the legal age of 18 years—from 54.2% in 1992–93 to 44.5% in 2005–06. But that still makes for an unacceptably large number of child brides in rural and semi-urban areas where most Indians still live. The underlying reasons are a mix of poverty, lack of education, social pressure, and, above all, low status of women.

Child marriage robs girls of education, their health, their future, and sometimes their lives. It is also one of the biggest barriers to achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals. And yet, disturbingly enough, it remains on the margins of mainstream debates on development.

However, there are some promising signs of change. In 2011, some of the world’s most eminent senior citizens came together to draw attention to child marriage. The Girls, Not Brides campaign, launched by The Elders, an organisation of renowned global leaders, is seeking to end child marriage within a generation. The campaign, announced at the 2011 Clinton Global Initiative annual meeting in September, is backed by people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mary Robinson, Graça Machel, and Ela Bhatt, founder of India’s Self Employed Women’s Association.

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Every year, 10 million girls younger than 18 years are married, usually to much older men. Child marriage is most common in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, though there are big differences in prevalence between and within countries in the same region largely due to varying economic status. “Girls from the poorest quintiles in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are three times more likely to get married before age 18 than girls from the richest quintile”, states UNICEF in a 2010 report titled Progress for Children: Achieving the MDGs with Equity.

Child marriage is not only a human rights issue, it is also a health issue. The practice has several severe health outcomes. “Early marriage has many medical risks. The reproductive organs are not fully developed. The body is not ready. Teenage mothers, especially those below 18 [years], risk hypertensive disorder, eclampsia, pre-eclampsia, and post-partum haemorrhage”. Child ren born from teenage mothers also face risks—chances of them being born prematurely are high”, says Roza Olyai, an Indian gynaecologist who is also the National Chairperson, Adolescent Health Committee of the Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India.

One of the root causes of India’s high maternal mortality and infant mortality rate is early marriage and early pregnancy, asserts Olyai. “I have patients from rural areas who have been married early and had early pregnancies. They come in for check-ups but they lack information. There is a big need to create awareness about adolescent health. In many families, the girl’s health is still not a priority.”

Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are an important cause of mortality for girls aged 15–19 years worldwide, accounting for 70 000 deaths every year, according to UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children, 2009.

Savitri’s father ekes out a living as a farm labourer in this arid part

For more on child marriages in India see Editorial Lancet 2011; 377: 180 and Perspectives Lancet 2011; 377: 197

Savitri Pullakunta (left) had her marriage stopped by a community initiative
Savitri finished her tenth grade at a government school in Adoni, Andhra Pradesh. Neither of her parents can read or write. Soon after Savitri finished her tenth grade at school, her father arranged a partner for her. The village does not have a high school and she would have to travel 3 km if she wanted to continue her studies. The family did not have the spare money for the additional transport expenses and reasoned that marriage was the better option.

"When my father told me I was going to be married off, I felt my life had been ruined. I visualised a life like that of my mother—marriage, lots of children. Full stop. All dreams shattered," Savitri told The Lancet.

However, Savitri was more fortunate than women of her mother's generation. She had a support system—the other members of the girls' collective. The girls first discussed the matter among themselves. Then, they took up the issue with their school headmaster, who, in turn, got in touch with UNICEF field workers. The latter had helped set up these collectives, called Balika Sanghas. Then, they rallied the support of the village headman and the community health and nutrition workers. The collective pressure worked. Savitri's marriage was put on hold. More good news was in store. UNICEF as well as the local government has promised Savitri financial support so that she can carry on with her studies.

The fortuitous turn of events has also buoyed the spirits of other teenage girls in this rural backwater. "If my parents try to marry me off, I will go to the police. I will gather many girls and we will go to the village headman. We will stop the marriage", said Pushpalata Pagadala, another 15-year-old member of the girls' collective.

The girls’ collectives are sowing the seeds of change. There are fortnightly meetings where the girls get together in a safe place to learn, have fun, and talk about what is happening in their communities. They learn about the links between teenage pregnancy and high rates of infant mortality and maternal mortality and all the other adverse health effects of early marriage. They are sensitised about their rights and taught how to tap into various government and non-governmental schemes that can benefit them.

But the formation of collectives alone would achieve little without community mobilisation. It takes sustained work on the ground to produce a success story like Savitri. Murali Krishna Madamanchi, UNICEF's child protection officer in Andhra, says: "UNICEF has been working with the government of Andhra Pradesh on various child protection issues. We use a multi-pronged approach—empowering adolescent girls by forming Balika Sanghas, building inter-departmental convergence to work on child marriage issues, community partnership on child marriage by rallying the support of youth groups, women's groups, children in schools. Along with all this, we have also supported efforts to sensitisie key people like marriage hall owners, priests, religious leaders, community influencers, and so on. These initiatives became an integral element of our work in Adoni division on child marriage."

Prabhakar Reddy, the former revenue divisional officer of Adoni who spearheaded the antichild-marriage campaign, told The Lancet that, this year, during the marriage season in the months of May and June, he and his team had managed to stop "more than 400 [child] marriages" in 17 administrative subdivisions of Adoni, covering about 1.5 million people. "The campaign created a massive awareness", he said.

UNICEF Child Protection Specialist Sonykutty George says that UNICEF's aim is not to create parallel structures but strengthen government structures. Under the pilot initiative, an integrated community-based strategy involving government departments, village leaders, community groups, and children was adopted. School centres were set up to help reintegrate girls into the formal school system.

As Savitri's story illustrates, success stems from this collective approach. Even the village priest was part of Adoni's antichild-marriage strategy. "I ask parents to produce some identity proof of their child, a birth certificate, a voter's ID card, anything which will conclusively prove that the bride is above 18 years", says priest Uppala Subramanya Sastry who undertakes marriage ceremonies in six villages in the Kurnool district. The local police have also played a pivotal part in thwarting child marriages.

Schools and teachers are also key. Several studies show that education delays pregnancy and helps stabilise population. Educated mothers are also more likely to immunise their children, be better informed about nutrition, and use improved birth spacing practices. "Education is the only solution. The girl child has to remain in school", says Kurnool District Collector Ramsankar Naik. "To check drop outs among them, we have started several initiatives—hostel, midday meal, free text books etc", he adds.

As the new global campaign to end child marriages kicks off, the efforts of people in forgotten corners of India like Adoni could offer important lessons and inspiration for other countries.

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