

# Early Marriage and Its Impact on Women Empowerment: A Study with Special Reference to Murshidabad District, West Bengal

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*Abstract- Early marriage remains a critical socio-cultural issue in India, particularly in districts like Murshidabad, West Bengal, where its prevalence is significantly higher than the national average. This paper examines the impact of early marriage on women's empowerment with a specific focus on Murshidabad. Using secondary data from NFHS, UNFPA, and recent studies, the research highlights how early marriage adversely affects education, health, economic independence, and decision-making power among women. The findings reveal that early marriage perpetuates gender inequality and restricts women's agency. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at reducing early marriage and promoting women's empowerment.*

*Keywords: Early Marriage, Women Empowerment, Murshidabad, Gender Inequality, Child Marriage, Socio-Economic Development*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment is a fundamental aspect of sustainable development. It includes access to education, healthcare, economic participation, and decision-making rights. However, early marriage continues to act as a major barrier to achieving gender equality.

Early marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18, is still prevalent in many parts of India. Although national rates have declined over time, certain districts such as Murshidabad remain hotspots. Studies show that early marriage is deeply rooted in poverty, lack of education, and socio-cultural norms.

Murshidabad district in West Bengal has been identified as one of the regions with extremely high prevalence of child marriage, making it an important case for analysis.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To analyze the prevalence of early marriage in Murshidabad district.
2. To examine the causes of early marriage.
3. To assess its impact on women's empowerment.
4. To suggest measures for reducing early marriage and enhancing empowerment.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on secondary data analysis. Data has been collected from:

- National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5)
- UNFPA reports
- Government and research publications
- Recent district-level studies

A qualitative analytical method has been used.

## IV. PREVALENCE OF EARLY MARRIAGE IN MURSHIDABAD

Murshidabad district shows alarmingly high levels of early marriage:

- Around 62–66% of women were married before 18 years in the district, far higher than the national average.
- The prevalence is over 2.5 times higher than the national rate, indicating a severe regional disparity.
- Teenage pregnancy is also high, with around 21% of pregnancies occurring among adolescents in recent years.

These statistics clearly indicate that Murshidabad is a high-risk district where early marriage remains deeply entrenched.

V. CAUSES OF EARLY MARRIAGE IN MURSHIDABAD

5.1 Poverty

Economic hardship forces families to marry off daughters early to reduce financial burden.

5.2 Low Educational Attainment

High dropout rates among girls contribute significantly to early marriage.

5.3 Cultural and Religious Norms

Traditional beliefs emphasize early marriage as a means of protecting family honor.

5.4 Gender Inequality

Patriarchal structures limit women's roles to domestic responsibilities.

5.5 Lack of Awareness

Limited awareness about legal rights and consequences perpetuates the practice.

VI. IMPACT OF EARLY MARRIAGE ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

6.1 Educational Deprivation

Early marriage leads to school dropout, preventing girls from completing education and acquiring skills.

6.2 Health Risks

Early pregnancy increases risks such as:

- Maternal mortality
- Malnutrition
- Complications during childbirth

Teen mothers often lack access to proper healthcare.

6.3 Economic Dependence

Women married early are less likely to be employed and remain financially dependent.

6.4 Limited Decision-Making Power

Early marriage reduces autonomy in:

- Household decisions
- Reproductive choices
- Financial matters

6.5 Social Isolation

Young brides are often isolated from peers and support systems, affecting mental health.

VII. EARLY MARRIAGE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

Empowerment is multidimensional, involving agency, resources, and achievements. Early marriage negatively impacts all three:

- Agency: Girls lose freedom of choice and mobility
- Resources: Limited access to education and income
- Achievements: Poor health and reduced life opportunities

Research shows that delaying marriage significantly improves women's empowerment indicators such as education, employment, and autonomy.

VIII. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

8.1 Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006)

Legal framework prohibiting marriage below 18 years for girls.

8.2 Kanyashree Scheme (West Bengal)

Encourages girls to stay in school and delay marriage.

8.3 Awareness Campaigns

Local administration in Murshidabad has prevented numerous child marriages through intervention programs.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote girls' education through scholarships and incentives
2. Strengthen enforcement of child marriage laws
3. Increase awareness campaigns in rural areas
4. Provide vocational training and employment opportunities
5. Involve community leaders in social change
6. Improve access to reproductive health services

## X. CONCLUSION

Early marriage remains a serious challenge in Murshidabad district and continues to hinder women empowerment. It restricts educational opportunities, affects health, limits economic independence, and reduces decision-making power. Addressing this issue requires a multi-dimensional approach involving legal, educational, and socio-cultural interventions.

Empowering women by delaying marriage is essential for achieving gender equality and sustainable development.

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