



CHAPTER 9

The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Marriage in India

Gayatri Sharma and Ayesha Khaliq

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated families across the globe. As a result of COVID-19, up to ten million more girls are now at risk of becoming child brides (UNICEF 2021). Since all girls are not positioned equally, some will suffer more. Experience from the Ebola crisis strongly suggests that girls will be disproportionately affected, particularly those among the poorest and most socially marginalized groups (Girls Not Brides 2020). Economically weaker countries have been less successful in withstanding the pandemic. India was particularly vulnerable since government expenditure on healthcare and education has reduced over the years, thereby increasing the gap between those who can afford private education and healthcare and those who cannot. Between 2019 and 2020, India spent only 3.1 percent of its gross domestic product on education and 1.26 percent on healthcare (Khadria and Thakur 2020; Mondal 2021). Those who are less able to access education and healthcare are more vulnerable to

Notes for this section can be found on page 170.

death, financial insecurity, dropping out from education, child marriage, child labor, and child trafficking.

In March 2020, India imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, and this had disastrous consequences for poor people who lacked the savings required to survive without a work-related income in cities across India. The lockdown was followed by the revelation that a religious gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat (an Islamic missionary movement) in New Delhi in mid-March 2020 had led to a large spike in the coronavirus cases reported in India. This revelation came at a time when Hindu-Muslim relations were already strained. Several news channels published fake news ostensibly showing Muslims deliberately spreading the coronavirus. Religious tensions, which were already high in India, were exacerbated and cases of discrimination toward Muslims in relation to the denial of healthcare and the refusal to accept their services were reported.

The social impact of the marginalization of Muslims was first felt when Muslim women had difficulty in accessing medical services. Cases were reported from Rajasthan and Jharkhand of pregnant Muslim women being denied such services and the subsequent death of a baby (Angad 2020; Iqbal 2020). A hospital in Uttar Pradesh required Muslims to have evidence of a negative COVID-19 test result before they could receive treatment (Agrawal 2020). In Gujarat, a hospital was reported to be segregating Hindu and Muslim patients (Ghosh and Dabhi 2020). A surge in atrocities against Dalits was also reported during the first wave.¹ The concept of physical distancing was twisted to strengthen notions of untouchability—a form of social ostracism and segregation directed against Dalits. Although this is prohibited by the Constitution, it is still extant, and the pandemic led to its increased practice along with other forms of caste-based discrimination. For example, *Times Now* reported that in Jharkhand, “Five Brahmins lodged at [a] quarantine facility refuse[d] to eat food prepared by SC cooks” (“Jharkhand” 2020).

Girls who belong to Adivasi families are normally at higher risk of being married off early because of their lack of access to education and employment opportunities. Adivasis (Indigenous/tribal groups) primarily live in remote forest fringe areas. The pandemic compounded the problem because schools remained closed and access to livelihood options became more difficult to secure. Furthermore, Indigenous people living in these areas are more vulnerable to the impact of climate change. Heavy flooding in Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar coincided with the 2020 pandemic,

leading to further distress for Indigenous communities and greater likelihood of girls being subjected to forced or early marriage.

Since the Indian economy contracted by a historic 23.9 percent following the unplanned lockdown in March 2020, the loss of jobs and livelihood translated into children being pulled out of school, girls being forced into early marriages, and an increase in child labor. When the first lockdown eased in June and July 2020, child marriages spiked, marking a 17 percent increase from the previous year (Bhandare 2020). According to the *Times of India* (“Government Intervened” 2020), CHILDLINE, a national helpline, intervened in nearly 5,584 cases related to child marriage during the 2020 lockdown. A study conducted by the Centre for Catalyzing Change (2020) reported that in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Bihar, 8 percent of respondents came across incidents of child marriage in their neighborhood that had occurred since the beginning of the pandemic, and two-thirds of adolescents reported that their family members were planning their marriage; the proportion was higher among girls.

Child marriage has significant detrimental ramifications for girls, and the pandemic has made matters much worse. In line with this, this chapter aims to examine the role of COVID-19 in exacerbating the conditions contributing to a rise in child marriages in India, and proposes recommendations for developing a comprehensive response to prevent the number of child marriages from escalating. Our qualitative research methodology relied on a desk-based analysis of existing materials. Information was acquired from published literature, journals, media articles, and research papers for an in-depth analysis aimed at understanding the factors that contribute to child marriage in India, as well as their consequences and their impact on girls’ development and well-being.

Reverse Migration

Within a few days of the start of the twenty-one-day lockdown announced on 24 March 2020, thousands of migrant workers gathered at the bus station in Delhi in the hope of reaching home. Unable to find transport, casual workers formerly employed in Delhi, Gurgaon (Haryana), Punjab, Gujarat, Mumbai (Maharashtra), and Tamil Nadu walked home to their native villages and towns in Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Bihar, and Jharkhand. As factories and workplaces closed down, people who were dependent on daily wages ran out of savings. The Supreme Court directed the central

and state government to send migrant workers back to their homes in special trains only in June, more than two months after the lockdown was implemented. It is unclear how many workers migrated back to their homes in rural areas, but based on census estimates of the number of migrants who enter urban areas annually for work, it is estimated that about twenty-three million workers migrated back to rural areas as a result of COVID-19 (Kundu 2020). According to the World Bank (2020), the lockdown in India has had an impact on the livelihoods of a large proportion of the country's nearly forty million internal migrants. While government and NGOs did provide basic necessities in camps to those who did not return home, many had to take out loans to survive. This is most likely to result in an upsurge in child marriage.

In April 2021, as the second wave of the pandemic set in and a new set of lockdowns was imposed, migrant workers again left metropolitan cities to return to their villages. Although workers were warned to prepare for the second stage of lockdown, the damage caused by the first lockdown had not yet been overcome. Since the rural economy (which is dependent primarily on agriculture) cannot absorb the growing influx of workers, growing impoverishment in rural areas is a cause for concern. Rural areas cannot absorb the influx of labor in productive work without steps being taken by the state and central governments to generate employment, so child marriages are very likely to increase among migrant workers who find it financially difficult to educate their children.

Women Power Connect held focus group discussions during the 2020 and 2021 lockdowns with grassroots organizations working in the states of Jharkhand and Rajasthan on ending child marriage. According to their unpublished findings, reverse migration in Jharkhand played a significant role in this practice. With men returning and girls remaining at home, parents and families arranged for girls to be married to returnees. Since expenses were low in lockdown weddings, parents had no difficulty arranging these marriages. In Rajasthan as well, reverse migration has contributed to an increase in child marriage in areas that experience a high rate of out-migration.

Discrimination against Muslims

Religious tensions are contributing to the growing marginalization of Muslims in India. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 ensures Indian citizenship to all religious community migrants from Paki-

stan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, except Muslims. Since the National Registration of Citizens requires proof of citizenship, Muslims fear the loss of their Indian citizenship. Protests against the CAA in 2019 led to riots in New Delhi in which both Hindus and Muslims lost their lives. Growing marginalization translates into a lack of access to services, impoverishment, violence, and, consequently, higher rates of child marriage.

Following the Tablighi Jamaat incident, the national media in India promoted the idea that Muslims had deliberately planned the event to spread the virus in India. The hashtag “Corona-jihad” was flashed on news channels such as Zee News and Republic TV. Since people found it hard to differentiate between Muslims and Tablighis, all Muslims were seen as potential carriers of the virus. Fake news shots of Muslim vendors spitting on vegetables and on police officials were spread by local news channels and the print media, and this led to a massive increase in Islamophobia. This manifests in refusal to accept groceries from Muslim delivery workers, discrimination between Hindu and Muslim patients, and denial of medical care to pregnant Muslim women.

According to Astitva, an NGO in western Uttar Pradesh, women belonging to marginalized communities (Dalits and Muslims) faced an increase in domestic violence, loss of income, and child marriage (Salim 2021). Media reports highlighted the demand to boycott Muslim economic activities, and this had drastic ramifications for women. With an increase in hatred against this maligned community, Muslim women faced difficulties in accessing services and support, such that even if the rates of child marriage do not go up among Muslim families, the stigma of being seen to be carriers of the virus and the subsequent marginalization will put Muslim child brides at heightened risk of sexually transmitted disease, mental health problems, and restricted access to maternal healthcare.

An Overview of Child Marriage in India

Official data has shown a trend toward improvement in cases of child marriage across India since 2015. According to data from the National Family Health Survey 4 (2015–16), 26.8 percent of girls were married before the legal age of eighteen (Government of India, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2016)—a dramatic improvement over the situation in 2005/2006, when almost half of all girls were married before the age of

eighteen. According to the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (2018), girl child marriages are highest among the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. According to this report, in Bihar, Gujarat, and Telangana child marriage rates are high among the Other Backward Castes (those that are educationally or socially disadvantaged).

In order to address the root cause of child marriage and prevent cases from rising, it is important to understand why child marriages occur in the first place, and how the pandemic will further exacerbate these root causes. Nancy Fraser (2003) provides a means of analyzing such complex issues; she engages in a thought experiment during which she imagines a conceptual spectrum of social divisions: at one end of the spectrum are redistribution issues (she gives the example of class differentiation), while at the other end are recognition issues (she gives the example of sexual differentiation). Between these two extremes lie more complex social divisions, at the edges of which both recognition and redistribution issues, like gender and race, for example, intersect. We try to understand where child early and forced marriage (CEFM) in India fits on this spectrum so as to identify solutions and the priorities that policymakers should insist upon, and we return to Fraser's work later in this chapter.

In the course of our work on child marriage, we have learned that the reasons behind early child marriage differ from state to state and region to region. Child marriage rates are far higher in rural areas than in urban areas because there are fewer opportunities for education and work for women in the former. The factors responsible for the prevalence of child marriage, despite prohibition, vary according to caste, class, religion, tradition, social norms, coercion, and economic status, but the most significant factor is poverty coupled with gender inequality and the low value associated with girls and women in India.

Factors Contributing to Child Marriages in India

Poverty and Lack of Education

Girls are considered a financial liability since they are perceived to be financially dependent on male members of the family; marrying them early is considered a viable option. The patriarchal mindset that favors boys over girls is embedded in Indian society; when given a choice, a family would rather spend its resources on education and health for boys than

for girls. Child marriage, therefore, is seen to be a way of reducing the cost inherent in a girl's education. In turn, the lack of good quality education available for girls that could motivate them to remain in school or help them acquire a job or marketable skills contributes to the vicious cycle of poverty. Poor-quality school education is not geared toward skills-building and is a major contributor to CEFM. Parental illiteracy is also a major factor behind the prevalence of child marriage. Parents with little or no education do not understand the consequences of early marriage for their daughters and are unaware that it is a violation of a child's basic human rights.

Control over a Girl's Sexuality and Fear of Violence Against Women and Girls

Parents often fear the sexual autonomy of girls and see it as leading to pre-marital sex and pregnancy out of wedlock. Early marriage paves the way for the transfer of the control of a girl's sexual and reproductive life to her husband and in-laws (Girls Not Brides 2015). With the closure of schools and the disruption in education caused by the pandemic, parents are more worried about controlling their daughters' sexuality and thus resort to marrying them off early to preserve their family honor. In a conservative society, the social stigma associated with a pregnancy before marriage is greater than that associated with child marriage. The widespread notion of family honor coerces families into marrying their daughters early so as to preserve the girls' virginity. Child marriages provide a way of arranging a girl's marriage before she is mature enough to exercise her right to choose. Furthermore, what are known as love marriages (as opposed to arranged ones) have less social acceptability, particularly when the bride and groom belong to different caste groups or religions.

Dowry

The practice of dowry is widely prevalent in India; the bride's family pays the groom in cash or gifts upon marriage. The older the daughter is, the fewer her suitors and the more her parents then have to pay to get a match. Families, therefore, prefer to have their daughters married at a young age so as to reduce the cost of the dowry. The restrictions put in place during the pandemic have given poor families an opportunity to perform marriage ceremonies at a lower cost and with fewer people. This has been a major driving force for CEFM during the lockdown period.

Inadequate Implementation of Laws

The implementation of laws prohibiting child marriage has not proved effective. The enforcement of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) of 2006 is weak in India. An adequate budget has not been allocated by states to the implementation of the PCMA, and this has led to overburdened Child Marriage Prohibition Officers (CMPOs), some of whom do not even know what their roles and responsibilities are, according to Oxfam Indian and Women Power Connect (2018). At discussions organized by Women Power Connect in Jharkhand, the Protection Officers (appointed to deal with cases of domestic violence) were also tasked with the responsibility of preventing child marriage. The overburdening of these officers has led to a situation in which they are improperly trained and do not know how to deal with cases of child marriage.

Religious, Social, and Cultural Practices

In Rajasthan, custom plays a large role in perpetuating child marriage, along with the fear of sexual violence against girls that pushes families to marry them off early. For example, the customary practice of *Gauna*, which allows for the consummation of a child marriage only once the girl has reached maturity, is a cover-up for the solemnization of early marriages. In fact, *Gauna*, while disallowing early consummation of the marriage, encourages child marriage since the child bride is promised to a particular groom. The custom of *Mrityu Bhoj* in Rajasthan, which decrees high expenditure on food at funerals, also encourages child marriage, since families combine a funeral with a wedding in order to save costs. A high prevalence of sexual violence in Rajasthan, including rape and sexual harassment, leads to further child marriage as well, since marriage provides a form of security to girls by supposedly protecting them from sexual violence perpetrated by a stranger.

In 2016, among both Hindus and Muslims, 25 percent of women were married by the age of 15.5 years and 50 percent were married by that of 17.5 years, according to Srinivas Goli (2016). In the case of Dalits and Adivasis, 25 percent of women are married by 15.5 years of age. There is no evidence that child marriage is higher among Muslims in India than it is among Hindus. However, Goli suggests that since Muslim Sharia law allows for early marriage, there is a perception that child marriage is more common among Muslims.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Girls in India

The impact of COVID-19 on girls in India has been disastrous for a number of reasons. The first is the interruption of education and the move to online learning in 1.5 million schools in India, which has affected 247 million children (Sharma 2021), since not everyone has been able to adjust to this new normal. According to Meeta Sengupta and P. Krishnakumar (2018), the Digital Empowerment Foundation has reported that 30 percent of India's population lags behind in the measurement of basic literacy, and it is thrice that for digital literacy. Girls have less access to smartphones and the internet than boys do, so they are more likely than boys to drop out of online schooling, with the result that their early marriage becomes far more likely.

The second reason is the collapse of the health system in India given the huge increase in COVID-19 patients. Girls have found it difficult to access hospitals for reproductive healthcare or for abortions. Getting married has been an easier solution to an unwanted pregnancy than facing the stigma of such an event outside of marriage.

The increase in domestic violence is the third reason. During the 2020 lockdown reported incidents of domestic violence increased two-fold according to the National Commission for Women (NCW) (2020), which received 2,043 complaints in June 2020, the highest figure in eight months. Since families are forced to stay indoors and girls and women cannot go out and ask for help, cases of domestic violence have shot up. In some cases, girls themselves see marriage as a means of escaping a violent household. Furthermore, child marriages have increased because girls are unable to access services set up to help and support them, like healthcare NGOs, because offices are closed, and staff are working from home.

The fourth reason is the death of both parents, particularly during the second wave of COVID-19 in India, which has led to abandoned and orphaned children, many of whom are at high risk of sexual abuse and violence. Girls are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence than boys, and while government schemes have been announced to help children left orphaned by COVID-19, such schemes are unlikely to prevent an increase in child trafficking and child marriage, especially for girls.

As a result of COVID-19, shrinking incomes, and the diversification of funds spent on combating the virus, it is expected that more and more girls will be pulled out of school and either trafficked for marriage or sex work or married off early to ease the financial burden on the natal family.

There is no official data yet on the extent of the increase in child marriages in India, but we do know that the long-term consequences of COVID-19 will be enormous for girls.

The Legal Framework in India

The prohibition of child marriage is specifically dealt with by the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 (PCMA), which makes the legal age of marriage eighteen for women and twenty-one for men. Personal laws follow similar age criteria for entering a valid marriage, with the exception of Muslim Sharia law, which makes the attainment of puberty for both boys and girls the minimum requirement for marriage. Child marriage can be repudiated by the Muslim girl if she was married before she was fifteen years of age according to the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939.

The law on child marriage has its limitations in India, since the PCMA differentiates between men and women with regard to the age of marriage and does not make child marriages illegal (but only voidable at the option of either party to the marriage). Further, although the PCMA was enacted in 2006, amendments were not made in the Muslim and Hindu marriage and divorce laws to make personal laws consonant with the PCMA. Consequently, the legal framework in India contradicts itself and is in urgent need of amendment.

The Government Response to Child Marriage

The primary response of the government to control child marriage has been through the law. Aside from the PCMA, laws prohibiting the practice of giving dowry and offering protection from domestic violence indirectly relate to the prevention of child marriage. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 failed to curb the practice of giving expensive gifts as a dowry at the time of a girl's marriage. Reasons for the failure of this law include growing materialism and the rise of capitalism in India, the lack of employment opportunities for women evident in the small number of employed women, and social acceptance of the custom. All this leads to few complaints being made at the time of marriage. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 (PWDVA), while used by many married women against their husbands and in-laws, is hardly used

by unmarried women against their parents according to the Lawyers Collective (2013). The PWDVA can be used by unmarried women to take action and seek redress against their parents forcing them to marry, but the mindset required to take legal action against one's parents and natal family members is, for the most part, missing in India.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the central government in India launched a high-level committee to look into the issue of motherhood and marriage at an early age. This was a welcome step since it showed the state's concern with the rising numbers of early marriages that are likely to take place, coupled with a rise in pregnancies. In August 2020, the Prime Minister made an announcement to raise the legal marriageable age of girls from eighteen to twenty-one in an effort to tackle issues of population control, early pregnancy, maternal mortality, and the lack of opportunities for girls in education. However, instead of focusing on redistribution, the task force is increasing law enforcement, although this has not succeeded thus far in curbing child marriage in India. Despite the legal age of marriage being eighteen, girls as young as twelve and thirteen are married off in rural and underdeveloped areas. The proposed change, although well intentioned, will lead only to a change in the law and will have no impact on the existing social realities of the country. This change in the age of marriage will not prevent child marriage but will lead only to a higher rate of early marriage if being twenty-one years of age becomes the legal requirement.

Consequences of the Second COVID-19 Wave in India

The impact of the second wave of COVID-19 in India became clear only toward the end of April 2021 as the death rate shot up and the health system gradually collapsed under the weight of the number of COVID patients. Since children, particularly girls, had already dropped out of school given the lockdown restrictions in 2020, the second wave will further worsen the situation. For more than a year, most children have been at home and unable to access online education. Families with daughters are finding it extremely difficult to keep them at home for any longer. For the daughters' safety and to prevent them from being exploited and abused at home, marriage is now seen as the safest option. According to Anand Chawla Noor and Ayesha Singh (2021), CHILDLINE reported a 50 percent increase in the number of calls reporting abuse during this period. The increase in elopement and the additional stigma attached to

this has led parents to believe that getting their daughters married early is better than keeping them at home (Koushik 2021).

Given the severity of the second wave, girls are at heightened risk of exploitation and abuse. With incomes shrinking further and schools remaining closed, the view that a girl is a burden will gain ground again. According to UNICEF (2021), the second wave will have dire consequences for girls in terms of access to education, social protection, a lack of reproductive health services, and an increase in unwanted pregnancies and marriages. Due to the surge in COVID cases and deaths in India, the number of children who will be orphaned, abused, trafficked, and forced into early marriage will increase. Millions of children are struggling financially, and many girls are forced to engage in sex work in exchange for food and economic survival as it is.

Redistribution and Deconstruction for a Nuanced Response

Child marriage falls toward the redistribution side of Fraser's (2003) imaginary spectrum, but not to an extreme degree. Therefore, both redistribution (economic benefits for have-nots) and deconstruction (removing stigma associated with marginalized groups) are necessary to end child marriage in India.

Increasing the age of marriage to twenty-one years for women, in a country whose society views marriage as the greatest achievement for a woman, will remain a law on paper only. Although it delinks marriage from the age of consent (eighteen), it is unlikely to have any immediate impact on controlling child marriage. While schools are closed, communities and families will continue to practice child marriage irrespective of what the marriage age is. Even when schools are open, education does not easily translate into a paying job for a woman. Impoverishment, the lack of jobs linked to the contracting economy, the closure of schools, and being denied access to healthcare facilities will push families to marry their daughters early or even to sell them to traffickers.

A more comprehensive response to increasing child marriage rates in India would be, first, to identify who is most at risk. Migrant workers who have returned home to their villages in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal are vulnerable since their families have already experienced a drop in income and will do so again on an even greater scale. This may well translate into early marriage being forced on girls. Uttar Pradesh and

Bihar have the highest numbers of workers who migrate to other cities, and it is reasonable to expect a surge in the number of workers returning to these two states. The financial implications lead us to suspect that early marriage will escalate here, too. West Bengal in particular is vulnerable to a surge in joblessness because the damage caused by Cyclone Amphan in May 2020 is still being felt. Girls here too are at increased risk, so the governments in these vulnerable states should remain alert to the high possibility of an increase in child marriage and child trafficking.

The urgently needed protection of children from poor households, particularly in rural areas and districts in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal (and other identified vulnerable states), needs to be prioritized in government efforts. Innovative strategies need to be developed to provide education to those children, particularly girls, who do not have internet access and will not be able to attend online classes. They are at extreme risk. In Jharkhand, loudspeakers are being used to disseminate educational information, and other such strategies need to be implemented soon. Since girls are given less nutritious food to eat than their brothers even in normal times, in times of crisis, this disparity will increase. The midday meal that is provided in schools can be delivered to homes, as was done in the state of Kerala. Providing sanitary napkins to girls and providing information on hygiene and handwashing must be prioritized. While job-creation schemes are laudable, the immediate relief of food, basic education, and healthcare needs to be provided to those girls most at risk of CEFM.

According to a report in *The Print* (Tewari and Mishra 2019), the UNDP's Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (2018) has indicated that every third Dalit and Muslim in India is multidimensionally poor. This poverty is not just about income, but includes nutrition, health, education, and assets. Official data does not show that child marriages are higher among Muslims in India or that the issue has any religious dimension to it. This situation is likely to change in the COVID-19 context as more and more Muslims face ostracism and discrimination. Muslims in the vulnerable states, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, may face an even sharper decline in income than other communities, and the government should be cautious in relation to this.

COVID-19 has proved to be doubly treacherous for the marginalized Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims. Once cases of COVID-19 decrease and governments and NGOs are able to conduct their training and awareness-generation programs, the needs of these vulnerable categories of people will have to be prioritized, and the needs of girls, if they are to escape

being married off or sold to traffickers, given even greater priority. Issues of religious discrimination cannot be politely brushed under the carpet; the social cost of such discrimination has to be discussed openly and dealt with. Deconstruction of the Muslim other will become important in NGO activities if they are to reduce stigma against the Muslim community. It is essential to bridge the distance between the government and the marginalized for effective post-COVID-19 policies. The core principles of nondiscrimination, social justice, and equality should be the basis on which rehabilitation and redistribution plans are carried out.

Conclusion

To prevent the number of child marriages from escalating, it is important to identify who is vulnerable to this practice, based on identity and economic considerations. Child protection schemes must be strengthened to eliminate child marriage and must be included in COVID-19 recovery and prevention plans. By providing cash and other economic handouts to vulnerable families and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services, it is possible to reduce the number of early marriages. State initiatives to prevent child marriage need to address the basic needs of those who are marginalized. Changes in the child marriage law are of secondary concern and need not be accorded priority right now. The need now is to strategize toward interventions that will bear realistic outcomes. The government has to refocus its attention and employ a gender-sensitive approach to rescue girls, particularly those coming from migrant workers' families and marginalized groups. Saving families from economic ruin will mean saving some girls, at least, from early marriage, and this is of paramount importance.

GAYATRI SHARMA is a human rights lawyer and is currently the Programme Director at Women Power Connect, a network-based NGO in India that works on various issues concerning gender and women's rights, including the prevention of child marriage. She holds an LLM degree from the University of Warwick.

AYESHA KHALIQ previously worked at Women Power Connect as a Project Coordinator. She has a keen interest in gender, child rights, policy, and inclusive social development. She holds a bachelor's and master's in Sociology from the University of Delhi and an MSc in Social Policy from the London School of Economics.

Note

1. The word Dalit translates to “oppressed.”

References

- Agrawal, Kabir. 2020. “UP Hospital Bars Muslim Patients Who Don’t Come with Negative Test for COVID-19.” *The Wire*, 19 April. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://thewire.in/communalism/up-hospital-bars-muslim-patients-who-dont-come-with-negative-test-for-covid-19>.
- Angad, Abhishek. 2020. “In Jharkhand, Pregnant Woman Told to Clean up Blood, Loses Child.” *Indian Express*, April 19. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/in-jharkhand-pregnant-woman-says-told-to-clean-up-blood-loses-child-6368865/>.
- Bhandare, Namita. 2020. “Covid-19 and the Spike in Child Marriages.” *Hindustan Times*, 4 September. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/covid-19-and-the-spike-in-child-marriages/story-aLS6zAq2Beoiyb4wyrfbdM.html>.
- Centre for Catalyzing Change. 2020. “Assessment of Issues Faced by Adolescent Girls & Boys During Covid-19 and the Lockdown.” Retrieved 22 September 2022 from [https://www.c3india.org/uploads/news/Youth_survey_\(low_Res\).pdf](https://www.c3india.org/uploads/news/Youth_survey_(low_Res).pdf).
- Fraser, Nancy. 2003. “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation.” In Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political–Philosophical Exchange*, 7–109. London: Verso.
- Ghosh, Sohini, and Parimal A. Dabhi. 2020. “Ahmedabad Hospital Splits COVID Wards on Faith, Says Govt Decision.” *Indian Express*, 17 April. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/ahmedabad-covid-19-coronavirus-hospital-ward-6363040/>.
- Girls Not Brides. 2015. “Child, Early and Forced Marriage and the Control of Sexuality and Reproduction.” 1 October. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/child-early-and-forced-marriage-and-the-control-of-sexuality-and-reproduction/>.
- . 2020. “COVID-19 and Child, Early and Forced Marriage: An Agenda for Action.” 6 April. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/930/COVID-19-and-child-early-and-forced-marriage.pdf>.
- Goli, Srinivas. 2016. “Eliminating Child Marriages in India: Progress and Prospects.” New Delhi: Child Rights Focus, Beti, and Action Aid. Retrieved 22

- September 2022 from <https://www.actionaidindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Eliminating-Child-Marriage-in-India.pdf>.
- “Government Intervened to Stop Over 5,584 Child Marriage during Coronavirus-Induced Lockdown.” 2020. *Times of India*, 27 June. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/govt-intervened-to-stop-over-5584-child-marriage-during-coronavirus-induced-lockdown/articleshow/76661071.cms>.
- Government of India, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. 2016. “India Fact Sheet: National Family Health Survey 4 (NFHS-4), 2015–16.” Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/pdf/NFHS4/India.pdf>.
- Iqbal, Mohammed. 2020. “Pregnant Woman Refused Attention in Government Hospital.” *The Hindu*, 5 April. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/pregnant-woman-refused-attention-in-government-hospital-alleges-rajasthan-minister/article31261893.ece>.
- “Jharkhand: Five Brahmins Lodged at Quarantine Facility Refuse to Eat Food Prepared by SC Cooks.” 2020. *Times Now*, 25 May. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.timesnownews.com/mirror-now/crime/article/jharkhand-five-brahmins-lodged-at-quarantine-facility-refuse-to-eat-food-prepared-by-sc-cooks/596825>.
- Khadria, Binod, and Narender Thakur. 2020. “GDP in Education or Education in GDP?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 55(49). Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/49/letters/gdp-education-or-education-gdp.html>.
- Koushik, Janardhan. 2021. “Tamil Nadu: Amid Covid-19 Lockdown, Nilgiris Witnessing Rise in Cases of Child Marriages, Sexual Abuse.” *Indian Express*, 1 May. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/tamil-nadu-amid-covid-19-lockdown-nilgiris-witnessing-rise-in-cases-of-child-marriages-sexual-abuse-7298115/>.
- Kundu, Sridhar. 2020. “At Least 23 Million Migrants Are Returning to India’s Villages: Can the Rural Economy Keep Up?” *Scroll.in*, 25 May. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://scroll.in/article/962804/at-least-23-million-migrants-are-returning-to-indias-villages-can-the-rural-economy-keep-up>.
- Lawyers Collective. 2013. “Staying Alive: Monitoring and Evaluation Reports.” Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <http://www.lawyerscollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Staying-Alive-Evaluating-Court-Orders.pdf>.
- Mondal, Dibyendu. 2021. “India Spends Just 1.26 Percent of GDP on Public Healthcare.” *Sunday Guardian Live*, 2 January. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/india-spends-just-1-26-gdp-public-healthcare>.
- National Commission for Women. 2020. “Increase in Domestic Violence against Women.” *Press Information Bureau*, 22 September. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1657678>.

- NCPCR (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights). 2018. "India Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy." *Young Lives*, 18 September. <https://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/default/files/migrated/India%20Report.pdf>.
- NFHS (National Family Health Survey). 2015–16. "Key Findings from NFHS 4." Retrieved 7 November 2022 from <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/pdf/NFHS4/India.pdf>.
- . 2019–20. "Key Findings from NFHS 5." Retrieved 7 November 2022 from http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5_FCTS/India.pdf.
- Noor, Anand Chawla, and Ayesha Singh. 2021. "The Covid Generation: Children Stare at a Grim and Desperate Future." *New Indian Express*, 25 April. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.newindianexpress.com/magazine/2021/apr/25/the-covid-generationindias-children-stare-at-a-grim-and-desperate-future-2293506.html>.
- Oxfam India, and Women Power Connect. 2018. "Mapping and Identifying Gaps in Support Services Addressing Domestic Violence and Child Marriage: Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh"(unpublished report available on request from the authors).
- Salim, Mariya. 2021. "How Marginalised Women in India Bore an Extra Burden of Covid-19 'Shadow Pandemic.'" *IPS News*, 1 March. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <http://www.ipsnews.net/2021/03/marginalised-women-india-bore-extra-burden-covid-19-shadow-pandemic/>.
- Sengupta, Meeta, and P. Krishnakumar. 2018. "A Look at India's Deep Digital Literacy Divide and Why It Needs to Be Bridged." *Financial Express*, 24 September. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.financialexpress.com/education-2/a-look-at-indias-deep-digital-literacy-divide-and-why-it-needs-to-be-bridged/1323822/>.
- Sharma, Milan. 2021. "Closure of 1.5 Million Schools in India Due to Covid-19 Pandemic Impacts 247 Million Children." *India Today*, 5 March. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/closure-of-1-5-million-schools-in-india-due-to-covid-19-pandemic-impacts-247-million-children-1775892-2021-03-05>.
- Tewari, Ruhi, and Abhishek Mishra. 2019. "Every Second ST, Every Third Dalit and Muslim is Poor, Not Just Financially: UN Report." *The Print*, 12 July. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://theprint.in/india/every-second-st-every-third-dalit-muslim-in-india-poor-not-just-financially-un-report/262270/>.
- UN (United Nations). 2021. "India's New COVID-19 Wave is Spreading like 'Wildfire,' Warns UN Children's Fund." *UN News*, 7 May. Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/05/1091512>.
- UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). 2021. "COVID-19: A Threat to Progress Against Child Marriage." *UNICEF*. Retrieved 22 September 2022

from <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>.

World Bank. 2020. "COVID-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens: Migration and Development." Retrieved 22 September 2022 from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33634/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>.