Understanding the Phenomenon of Rushed Marriages during Covid-19

February 2024

crea

Content

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

AGYW	Adolescent Girls and Young women
AJWS	American Jewish World Services
AMIED	Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development
ANM	Auxiliary Nursing and Midwife
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CRY	Child Rights and You
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CWC	Child Welfare Committee
DJ	Disc Jockey
DWCD	Department of Women and Child Development
FGD	Focused Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GNB	Girls not Brides
GNM	General Nursing and Midwifery
GoI	Government of India
IDSJ	Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur
IPS	Indian Police Service
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
IT	Information Technology
KII	Key Informant Interview
KP	Kashtkari Panchayat
MASUM	Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal
MJAS	Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti
MWCD	Ministry of Women and Child Development
NCRB	National Crime Records Bureau
NCW	National Commission for Women
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NGO	Non-Government Organization
RMKU	Rajasthan Mahila Kamgaar Union
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TSF	ThoughtShop Foundation
UN	United Nation
UNFPA	United Nation Funds for Population Activities
UNICEF	United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund

Abbreviations

UP   Uttar Pradesh
VAW   Violence Against Women
WB   West Bengal
WHO   World Health Organization

Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns have had a devastating effect on communities and economies throughout the world. Exacerbating existing inequalities, the pandemic has exposed unique challenges with an unprecedented rise in numbers of child/early/forced marriages. However, one of the least documented consequence of the pandemic in the Indian context is a spurt in the phenomenon of 'rushed marriages' during the pandemic. This study attempts to arrive at a more nuanced definition of rushed marriages from empirical data gathered during the course of the study and underscores the gendered impact of the pandemic.

The present study uncovers and examines the reality of 'rushed marriages' during Covid-19, in-depth, going beyond the widespread reporting on rise in early marriages during the pandemic, to look into **the what, who, why, wherefore of the phenomenon and what now - the implications for the future.** It also looks at the continued quality and status of marriages that happened in a hurry.

At another level, the present study presents an analysis of how context has a bearing on the phenomenon, and on how marriages were conducted (age, process, transactions, rituals, gatherings and such). Fieldwork and online consultations were held in 4 states i.e. West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Interactions with a range of American Jewish World Service (AJWS) partners contributed critical information and knowledge to these questions. The attempt was to cast the net wide to get maximum information and do some deep dives into specific contexts. Hence, moving from the generality of the situation, specific contextual realities have been explored to provide a nuanced understanding of rushed marriages during Covid and to get a glimpse of girls whose lives changed overnight due to it.

Objectives

- To arrive at a nuanced definition of 'Rushed Marriages' during Covid-19 and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of rushed marriages.
- To understand the causes leading to rushed marriages during Covid-19.
- To highlight the multifaceted consequences of rushed marriages on adolescent girls and young women (AGYW).
- Draw learnings that can be used to develop prevention strategies or serve as warnings as humanitarian disasters can strike at any time without warning.
- To disseminate and share the findings of the study with AJWS partners who were part of the present study.

Methodology

This qualitative study has used both primary and secondary sources of data collection. A review of existing literature was undertaken with a focus on unearthing the definitions as well as the causes and consequences of rushed marriages during Covid-19. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with various stakeholders to gather information. Case studies of selected girls were also documented. The respondents and methods of primary data collection were as follows:

- Fieldwork covered 5 AJWS partners spread across different regions. In Rajasthan, interactions were held with the Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS) in Ajmer district, Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED) in Alwar district and with the Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgaar Union (RMKU), in Jaipur. In Maharashtra the the study covered two partners viz. Kagad Kach Patra Kashtkari Panchayat (KP) and Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Samiti (MASUM)

- Online interactions were held with 3 AJWS partners in two states - Sadbhavana Trust (U.P.) and Thoughtshop Foundation (TF) and Nishtha, West Bengal.

- Focus Group Discussions and IDIs were conducted to capture detailed narratives of 65 girls who were married during the pandemic and stayed in the marriages as well as those who returned to the natal families as the marriages did not survive the pandemic.

- KIIs with Founders/CEOs of 6 AJWS partner organisations were conducted to understand their views on the issue.

Key Findings

In highlighting the factors which led families to adopt negative coping mechanisms like getting the girls married off in a hurry, extreme poverty, loss of livelihoods and economic crises within households appear to be the root cause cutting across study sites. However, there were many other reasons which pushed families to conduct rushed marriages. Closure of schools meant that girls were out of the protective net of school, raising fears for their physical safety and concerns about threats to their sexual purity and, consequently, 'family honour.' Parents also saw marriage as a tool to protect their daughters against unwanted advances and sexual abuse. Moreover, cultural and regional discrepancies added many other reasons for rushed marriages.The study captures both the commonalities across study sites as well as the regional and cultural variations in the nature of rushed marriages, along with inter and intra state cultural differences. It is apparent that the traditional/ customary forms of marriage i.e. child and early marriage, early Gauna (formal sendoff of girls to marital homes) which had reduced over time, once again surfaced and increased exponentially in Covid times due to uncertainty of the future. The study argues that rushed marriages during Covid-19 were a particularly glaring example of how social norms and practices governed the lives of many girls by imposing control over their sexuality, cutting short their dreams, hopes and aspirations.

This study also provides an insight into the contingencies enforced by the lockdown which pushed girls who had rushed marriages into circumstances of extreme vulnerability. Cutting across sites, the narratives speak of the immediate and lifelong consequences AGWY faced: their educational and future employment opportunities were disrupted. Rushed marriages also took a toll on their sexual and reproductive health due to early pregnancy

and childbirth. Robbed of their agency to make decisions about their lives, their mental health and well-being were adversely impacted. Many girls had little choice and agency within their marital homes. Overbearing presence of authoritative family members reinforcing patriarchal norms within the household only added to their distress and affected their agency and voice. Forced pregnancies, unwanted physical and sexual touch, emotional trauma caused by pressure of paying dowry or not being able to meet societal expectations were all targeted towards them.

However, the study also highlights how the pandemic enabled a micro-environment where AGYW women could do what was otherwise not possible. A few girls in Ajmer district, Rajasthan for example, who had been married in their childhood at the age of 9 or 10 years, defied conventional norms and succeeded in postponing their Gauna. Some girls in Jaipur and Maharashtra had runaway marriages and got married in the temple. There was no engagement and no baraat (marriage procession).In West Bengal, Covid-19 pandemic intersected with Cyclone Amphan creating a dual disaster which led to increased violence and exposure to sexual activity within homes leading girls to opt for choice marriages. The study also documents narratives of girls especially in Maharashtra and Jaipur, who used the pandemic as an opportunity to coerce their parents into letting them marry their 'boyfriends' or 'partners'. These and other narratives demonstrate how girls exercised their agency during lockdowns and did not let the situation over power them.

Recommendations

Future pandemics as well as other humanitarian crisis are inevitable, and when they arrive, we need to avoid past pitfalls and instead transform the lessons emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic into better support for children, especially AGYW being pushed into rushed marriages. The study highlights seven key learnings which can be drawn to develop prevention/ intervention strategies that serve as warnings during any humanitarian disaster. It provides insights into the strategies emerging from the literature review as well as those put forth by the study partners in various states. Though the interventions were introduced by the organisations as a crisis response, they have now grown into new areas of work or been integrated

into their ongoing efforts. These strategies are likely to strengthen preparedness in times of future disasters and humanitarian crisis.

Learning # 1: Addressing Household Poverty

It is recommended that poverty alleviation programmes be strengthened by providing tools, skills and resources needed to overcome challenges faced by families.

Learning # 2: Need to prioritise continuing education

Cash or in-kind transfers conditional on school attendance have proved to be a promising intervention for keeping girls in school, and thereby delaying marriage.

Learning # 3: Strengthening programs and services

A clear learning emerging from the study is that it is crucial that , Childline, Police or the local CWCs should be vigilant and be declared as essential services during humanitarian crisis.

Learning # 4: Addressing Gender Based violence

In documenting the narratives of girls/ women across locations the study highlights how increased threat of gendered violence during the pandemic became a nightmare for girls and women. There is a therefore, a clear need to break the cycle of violence.

Learning # 5: Creating Awareness about humanitarian crisis

There is a need to ensure and establish pathways for resilience and empowerment during humanitarian response, particularly for those most affected, and those most marginalized socially, economically and politically.

Learning # 6: Need to create safe spaces for girls

The experiences of all the partners in the study underscores the need to create 'safe spaces' for enhancing agency and empowerment of girls and women.

Learning # 7: Ensuring a sustained dialogue on gender norms

The study underscores the critical need to broaden the way we define and articulate the problem of early/ forced and rushed marriages to include issues related to gender, sexuality and the centrality of marriage.

Section I : Introduction

Moments of crisis, those particular to households as well as those of a more generalized nature, reveal and exacerbate gender inequalities and their effects far more clearly than 'normal times'. The Covid-19 pandemic has been no exception.

There is growing evidence that children tend to be disproportionately affected during humanitarian crises, and their rights, lives and well-being are at risk of irreparable harm. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2007), a crisis refers to "an event or series of events representing a critical threat to the health, safety, security or wellbeing of a community, usually over a wide area. Armed conflicts, epidemics, famine, natural disasters, environmental emergencies and other major harmful events may involve or lead to a humanitarian crisis" (CRY, 2020).

Humanitarian crises due to natural disasters, civil wars, or pandemic situations often lead to spike in child marriages. Its reflections have been observed among the Rohingya and Syrian refugees, in civil-war torn South Sudan and Yemen, and during the Ebola outbreak in Liberia. In India, too, it was noted that families affected by shocks and disasters -like in floods and disaster-prone areas or areas of communal tension-are more likely to marry their children young than others. Indeed, a review of the 2008 Kosi flood suggests a spike of 7% in child marriage for both females and males (Khanna and Kochhar, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns have had a devastating effect on communities and economies throughout the world. Exacerbating existing inequalities, the pandemic has exposed unique challenges. As economies shut down and nations went into lockdowns, child marriage cases saw an unprecedented rise, followed by teenaged pregnancies, and school dropouts. With all the efforts and attempts to end child marriages – early, rushed and forced -- the pandemic has threatened to undo all of the advancements and developments that have taken place during the last decade (Sharma, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the well-being of people around the world, including girls vulnerable to child marriage. The exact impact of the pandemic on child marriage is highly uncertain and for the time being cannot be precisely quantified. Nonetheless, a number of anecdotal reports as well as theoretical and empirical research on previous crises make a compelling case that the Covid-19 pandemic may have affected the global incidence and prevalence of child marriage. Such impacts could stall, or even reverse, the substantial progress achieved in recent years to reduce the harmful practice of child marriage (Yukich, 2021).

The CRY policy brief (2020), highlights that since economic insecurity is one of the key drivers of child marriage, a fragile social protection system unable to reduce household-level vulnerabilities is a direct contributor to increasing child protection violations as well as child marriages during humanitarian crises (like Covid-19). The pandemic also weakened social structures, which added to anxieties related to girls' safety within households. In these adverse situations, child marriage is seen as a solution to protect girls for fear of stigma arising from various forms of abuse, including sexual assault (ibid).

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, emerging data and reports from those on the front lines, have shown that all types of violence against women and girls, especially domestic violence, intensified. This was the Shadow Pandemic growing amidst the Covid-19 crisis. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive Director of UN Women said, "With 90 countries in lockdown, four billion people are sheltering at home from the global contagion of Covid-19. It's a protective measure, but it brings another deadly danger. We see a ***shadow pandemic*** growing, of violence against women" (UNWOMEN, 2020). According to the UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore, "Covid-19 has made an already difficult situation for millions of girls even worse. Shuttered schools, isolation from friends and support networks, and rising poverty have added fuel to a fire the world was already struggling to put out." (UNICEF, 2021).

According to Jeejebhoy (2021), "In India too, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic compounded the existing vulnerabilities of adolescents, placing several development efforts with this population group, towards accelerating

education, delaying child marriage, addressing sexual and reproductive health needs, and building agency, at the risk of being dissipated. The consequences are evident in most spheres of their lives, and are even more severe for girls and young women than for boys and young men. Many young people have been left out of the shift to online education because of limited connectivity and access to devices. Girls have fared far worse than boys. Post Covid-19 unemployment rates are higher among the young than older populations, and among women than men. Khanna and Kochhar (2020) also highlight that a crisis-exacerbated increase in household poverty together with uncertain employment opportunities is a key driver of child marriage. Child marriage as a strategy to address household poverty has been noted in India in general as well as during the pandemic. Also documented are increased experiences of violence, increased symptoms of mental ill-health, and limited access to health services including those that the young are most in need of i.e. menstrual health supplies, contraceptives, pregnancy-related and other reproductive care, and mental health counselling.

One of the least documented consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Indian context is a spurt in the phenomenon of 'Rushed Marriages' during the pandemic and its impact on the life of girls

The situation in states covered by this study

In **West Bengal**, Covid-19 intersected with the climate crisis due to cyclone Amphan, which led to a sharp rise in child marriages. A number of areas in the region were washed away due to the rise in water levels which displaced a large number of people who were then forced to migrate due to financial insecurity and vulnerabilities. The Sundarbans area in particular, saw the number of child marriages increase exponentially due to the pandemic and climate change effects. Over 500 cases of child marriages were reported during the lockdown in 2021 till mid-March. The lockdown hit many families, prompting a few of them to marry off their minor daughters, as that would mean one less mouth to feed (The New Indian Express, 2020).

The culture of child marriage prevails strongly in the **Marathwada** region, but the economic crisis unleashed by the pandemic exacerbated it. According to

a member of Beed's CWC, the Covid-19 crisis definitely resulted in an increase in child marriages. The village economy in Marathwada completely collapsed because of the lockdown and every village had atleast 4-5 cases of child marriage. Some of the girls said that their fathers threatened suicide if they refused to marry. Many child marriages were carried out surreptitiously during the lockdown — conducted within households, while many in the village remained unaware. Besides, 'low cost' marriages during lockdown helped families who otherwise had to take loans for marriage ceremonies. Activists believe that farm distress, escalated by financial difficulties posed by Covid-19, led to an increase in the number of underage girls being married. While there are no regional figures tracking the rise, according to media reports, the Childline received 5,584 phone calls regarding issues relating to child marriages in the three-month Coronavirus-induced lockdown until June (The Hindu, 2020).

In **Rajasthan** during Covid-19, people's economic situation deteriorated and many low-income families chose to marry off their children with limited guests, thereby entailing fewer expenses. According to zonal coordinator at Action Aid, Tonk district, another reason could be the less monitoring by officials as the government machinery was busy handling the pandemic. The same fact was also reiterated by the Managing Director Saarthi Trust who stated that the number of cases in Rajasthan may have actually risen post-Covid-19 pandemic. Vulnerabilities and financial burdens may be the primary reasons behind it. Many low-income families feared death and safety and security of their daughters. The economic crisis brought by the pandemic aggravated the misery of low-income families and forced parents to choose this alternative. Poverty, accompanied by cultural and traditional practices, is the reason why the practice still survives. Rampant gender-based violent crimes also spur parents who believe marrying off young girls will keep them safer (Nitnaware, 2023).

In April and May 2021, when the entire state of **Uttar Pradesh** was in the grip of the second wave of the corona virus pandemic, the child protection group rescued 62 minors, mostly girls, who were being married off by their families. According to officials of the DWCD a total of 354 teenagers, mostly girls, were rescued across UP between April 1, 2020 and June 1, 2021. The chief operations officer of FXB India Suraksha, Noida, reported that 15 cases

were detected in the district during the pandemic. Lucknow unit of Childline, reported that a total of 34 teenage girls were rescued between April 2020 and the first week of June 2021. Millions of internal migrant workers lost their jobs in Covid and returned home to villages from cities, vying for limited work and struggling to provide for their families. Also, conflict within homes increased, daughters were not getting any attention, and schools and colleges were closed. Girls were willing to leave their natal homes with boys on the promise of marriage. There was fear of rise in trafficking (TOI, 2021)

Defining Rushed marriages

The review reveals that "Hasty marriage" – was a term initially coined by Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM), an NGO based in Pune. According to MASUM, hasty Marriages is a phenomenon that has emerged strongly in the states of Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and in the context of arranged marriages. They assert that, "arranged marriages traditionally take several months (and sometimes years) from the initial meeting, through the planning, to the ceremony and finally to the actual move of a woman or girl into cohabitation. In recent times, however, this period has been shortened to a few days and sometimes within the period of a day, hence a hasty marriage" (Akshay Khanna, 2018).

Jeejeebhoy (2020) opines that many women/girls were placed in precarious positions during the Covid-19 lockdown, due to economic hardship. Family members forced them into early engagements or marital alliances. Those who were already engaged were rushed into moving to their marital home before time. In crisis situations, parents see marriage as a coping mechanism to protect their daughters against unwanted advances and sexual abuse. While gathering data in these contexts is difficult and at times dangerous, there is a growing body of evidence to show increase in rates of child marriage during humanitarian crises. Research studies globally reveal the multi-layered impact of the pandemic on adolescents and their well-being.

Looking to the fact that there is no definition of 'Rushed Marriages' in existing literature, this study attempts to build on some of these statements to arrive at a more nuanced definition of Rushed Marriages from the

empirical evidence collected from four states in the country.

The present study attempts to uncover and examine the reality of 'Rushed marriages' during Covid-19 in-depth, going beyond the widespread reporting on rise in early marriages during Covid -19, to look into **the what, who, why, wherefore of the phenomenon and what now - the implications for the future.** It also looks at the continued quality and status of marriages that happened in a hurry.

The study also undertakes a review of literature to explore the existing evidence around rushed marriages during Covid-19 and build a more nuanced definition of Rushed Marriages from empirical data gathered during the course of the study.

At another level, this study presents an analysis of how context has a bearing on the phenomenon, and on how marriages were conducted (age, process, transactions, rituals, gatherings and such). Interactions with a wide range of American Jewish World Service (AJWS) partners across the country covering 4 states i.e. West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh Rajasthan and Maharashtra contributed critical information and knowledge to these questions. The attempt was to cast the net wide to get maximum information and do some deep dives into specific contexts. Hence, moving from the generality of the situation, specific contextual realities have been explored to provide a nuanced understanding of rushed marriages during Covid and to get a glimpse into the lives of girls whose existence changed overnight due to rushed marriages.

Objectives
- To arrive at a nuanced definition of 'Rushed Marriages' during Covid-19 and provide a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.
- To understand the causes leading to rushed marriages during Covid-19.
- To highlight the multifaceted consequences of rushed marriages on AGYW.
- Draw learnings that can be used to develop prevention strategies or serve as warnings as humanitarian disasters can strike at any time without warning.

- To share the findings of the study with AJWS partners who were part of the present study.

Key Research Questions

In order to understand the phenomenon of rushed marriages - encompassing early, child and forced marriages - the study sought to address the following questions:

- What are the factors that led to Rushed Marriages?

- Who are the key players/ actors involved in this process? In other words, which were the families/ communities that arranged and conducted these marriages?

- What were the demographics of the incidence of rushed marriages by geographic area, socio-economic status, ethnic identity and other factors – across regions?

- What are the implications of these rushed marriages on girls, in terms of (i) aspirations/ needs/ desires/ choices (ii) educational opportunities (iii) gender based violence (iv) livelihoods (v) control over sexuality (vi) health including mental health (vii) division of labour within the households?

- What happened to the girls who continued in such marriages and to those who returned to their natal homes?

- What are the learnings that can be drawn to develop prevention/ intervention strategies that serve as warnings as humanitarian disasters continue to strike at alarming rates?

Methodology

This qualitative study has used both primary and secondary sources of data collection. A review of existing literature was undertaken with a focus on

unearthing the definitions as well as the causes and consequences of rushed marriages during Covid-19. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with various stakeholders to gather information. Case studies of selected girls were also documented. The respondents and methods of primary data collection were as follows:

- Fieldwork covered 5 AJWS partners spread across different regions. In Rajasthan interactions were held with the Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS) in Ajmer district, Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED) in Alwar district and with the Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgaar Union (RMKU), in Jaipur. In Maharashtra the study covered two partners viz. Kagad Kach Patra Kashtkari Panchayat (KP) and Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Samiti (MASUM)
- Online interactions were held with 3 AJWS partners in two states - Sadbhavana Trust (U.P.) and Thoughtshop Foundation (TF) and Nishtha West Bengal
- Focus Group Discussions and IDIs were conducted to capture detailed narratives of 65 girls who were married during the pandemic and stayed in the marriages as well as those who returned to the natal families as the marriages did not survive the pandemic.
- KIIs with Founders/CEOs of 6 AJWS partner organisations were conducted to understand their views on the issue.

Key Informant Interviews	• Heads of Organizations (MJAS, AMIED, RMKU, MASUM, Kashtakari Panchayat) • Adolescent Girls • Parents
Focus Group Discussions	• Office and Field Staff of different organisations • Adolescent Girls • Community Members (Parents)
Via Zoom/Google Meet	• Karyakartas and Girl Leaders (Nishtha, W.B.) • Federation Team and Community based youth leaders and mentors (TSF, W.B.) • Sadbhavna Trust team (U.P.)

Research participants and method

The primary research subjects, the married girls, their parents, the key informants and community influencers, were approached through AJWS partners in four states.

Ethical Concerns and Protocols

Given the sensitivity of the subject, this study followed strict adherence to research protocols ensuring that the research does not bring about any harm to the respondents. At the outset, the purpose of the research was explained fully to the selected respondents. Voluntariness to participate in the study was emphasized by the research team. Utmost importance was placed on maintaining confidentiality and taking informed oral/ written consent of the participants prior to conducting KIIs and FGDs. The interactions began only after the respondents consented to participate. Oral consent was also taken for photographs. Names of respondents have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

Challenges and Limitations

A few challenges were faced during the field work:

- The organisations had difficulty in tracing girls who had hasty/rushed marriages during Covid-19.
- Some of the girls who could be traced had been married in locations far off from their natal villages/ cities. While telephonic interviews were held with a few, it was not possible to speak to others due to time constraints faced by them.
- The discussions were based on the experiences of girls, parents, community members and AJWS partners during Covid- 19, in the years 2020-2021. Memory recall was a challenge as a lot of time had lapsed.

Scheme of Chapters

The **Introductory Section** undertakes a review of literature to highlight the existing definitions of Rushed Marriages moving beyond the extent of spike in numbers and causes of child/early/rushed/forced marriages. **Section II** provides an insight into the location of the study area and partners. **Section III** looks at the causes behind Rushed Marriages - why did families/communities conduct these marriages. It examines what actually happened during Covid-19, where did such marriages take place, and who

were the people/communities that conducted these marriages. The chapter also explores the phenomenon of rushed marriages by looking at regional variations in causes of rushed marriages during the pandemic. **Section IV** underscores the multi-layered consequences of rushed marriages during the pandemic on the lives and well-being of adolescent girls. **Section V** recommends pathways to avert the alarming surge in rushed marriages across the country, with a view to mitigating their detrimental effects on the lives of women and girls during any future humanitarian crisis.

Section II: Location of the Study Area and AJWS Partners

All the married girls, their mothers, key informants including karyakartas (staff) and youth leaders were approached through 8 AJWS partners spread across 4 different states of the country. This helped gain an insight into the regional variations in the nature of rushed marriages during the pandemic. In Rajasthan interactions with three of AJWS partners' viz. Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS) Ajmer, Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED), Alwar and Rajasthan Mahila Kamgar Union (RMKU) Jaipur took place during field visits. In Maharashtra support of two organisations – Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Samiti (MASUM), Saswad, and Kagad Kach Patra Kashtkari Panchayat (KP), Pune, was sought. Online interactions were held with Thoughtshop Foundation and Nishtha in West Bengal and with Sadbhavna Trust, Lucknow, in Uttar Pradesh
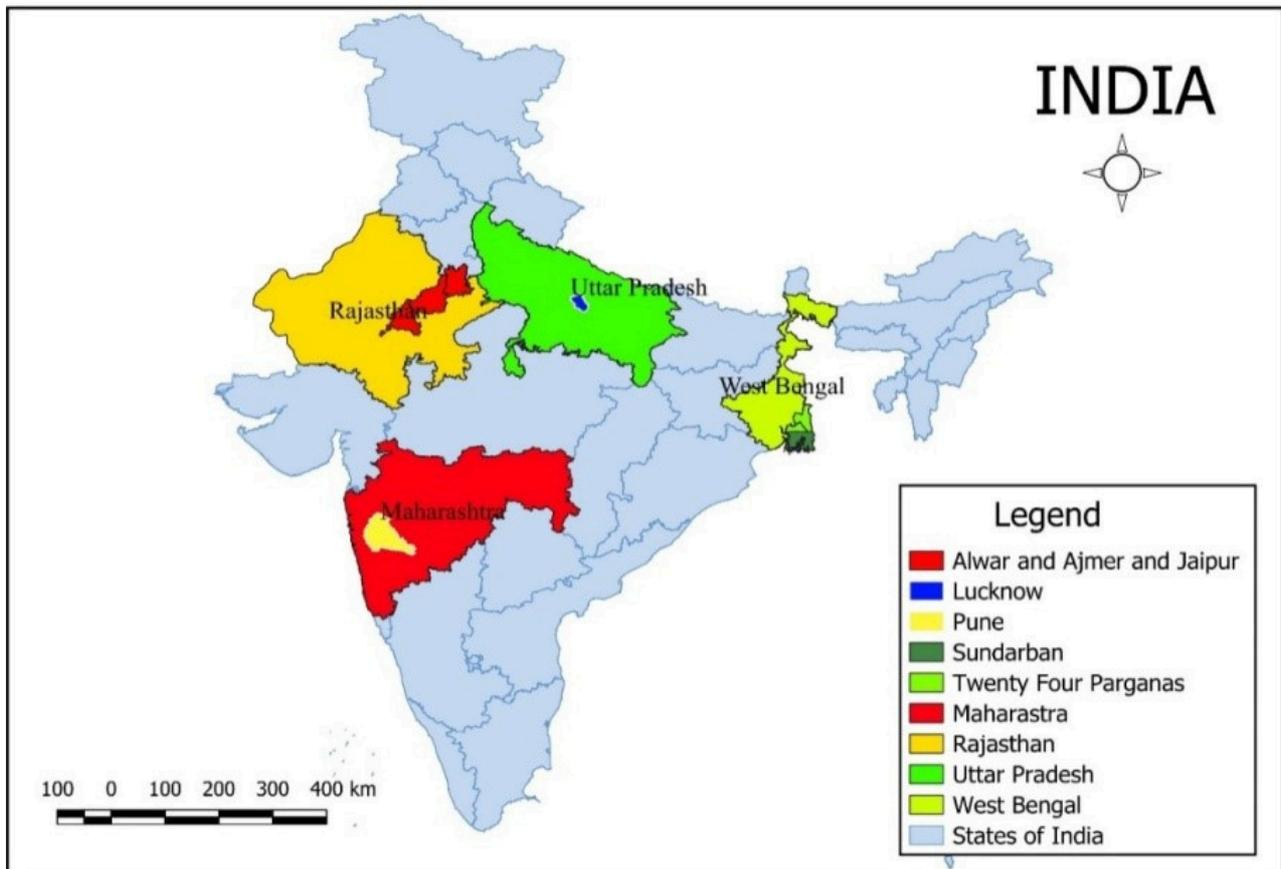
The partners were chosen because of their extensive work with adolescents' especially adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). Majority of them have been working on issues of child and early marriage over a long period of time and have formed strong community networks. All the partners were involved in providing relief measures to communities where they work, spread awareness regarding Covid-19 and the benefits of vaccination using slogans, wall paintings and posters. Specifically, towards their commitment towards Covid response, they continued to work to address the new and emerging challenges, including the impact of physical and mental health issues experienced by AGYW during the pandemic. They also worked towards reintegrating students who had lost out on education during the pandemic.

RAJASTHAN

Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS) is a grassroots, women led organisation based in Ajmer, Rajasthan. MJAS registered itself as an organization in the year 2000. It works towards uniting and empowering women in Ajmer, through collective action for social transformation. It provides space for girls and women to come together and fight for gender equality and justice by helping build confidence and self-sufficiency among them through their various skill-based programmes and organising women's groups at the village and community level. MJAS spread awareness regarding Covid-19 especially the benefits of vaccination within the community using slogans, wall painting and posters. They also prepared kits which included sanitary pads, undergarments etc. and distributed them to the girls who could not afford to buy them. MJAS has recently introduced an innovative program, Technology Enabled Girls Alliance (TEGA) to empower adolescent girls to thrive in an increasingly digital world. Girls participating in the program have acquired valuable skills in using mobile phones and various applications. Additionally, they have become proficient in accessing government schemes and this knowledge has positively impacted both their families and communities.

Interaction with the staff at MJAS office both in Ajmer and Kekdi block and girls who had rushed marriages during Covid-19 revealed that the girls mainly belonged to peri-urban, rural, lower socio-economic strata of society.

Majority girls belonged to the OBC community, and were in the age group of 15 to 26 years. Their educational levels ranged from Std IX to Graduates. 'Atta satta'*, is common in the district. It is a form of marriage traditional to Ajmer and is more prevalent among the Gurjar community, whose main occupation is animal husbandry. As the number of girls are fewer in this community, Atta Satta is becoming compulsory. The age of 'Gauna'* varies in different communities. During Covid, the age of Gauna was reduced and at some places girls were sent to their marital home immediately after marriage - even if they were as young as 15-16 years. However, several girls have also been able to delay their Gauna or walk out of child marriages with the support of MJAS.

*Atta Sattarefers to a form of exchange of off springs between families within the same community and is specific to some of the communities. Even when a woman is pregnant, a girl child is promised off in marriage to another family, which, in turn, promises a girl child in marriage. (Akshay Khanna, 2018)

*Gauna is a term used for formal send-off of the girls to their marital homes. Young girls can continue to reside in their less-restricted natal home and avoid conjugal responsibility till they are deemed ready to move to their marital home, usually following a custom called Gauna. This provides a buffer period for young girls, although their future is determined (Vikalp, 2019)

Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED) began its work in Alwar district in 2000. It is working to improve educational opportunities for vulnerable groups. The organization works with Muslim, Dalit, and tribal communities to embed social transformation through education and gender sensitisation as primary drivers of change. AMIED firmly believes that education plays a significant role in socio-economic development and cultural enrichment of the society and individuals. It believes in equal opportunity, irrespective of class, caste, religion and gender in all walks of life especially in the realm of education, to ensure non–discriminatory and equal distribution of development. Its experience of working with Meo Muslims has revealed that there is an urgent need for quality education for excluded children. Thus the broader vision of the organization revolves around work with the excluded and deprived communities including Meos to bring all the communities on a common platform and enable them to collectively participate in the process of self-development.

Interaction with the staff at AMIED office (Alwar, Kishangarhwas and Tijara blocks), girls affected by the phenomenon of rushed marriages, and their mothers revealed that the girls, belonged mainly to rural areas and lower socio-economic strata. Most of them belonged to the minority community and were in the age group of 14 years to 17 years. According to the staff at AMIED, the general age of girls at marriage is around 21-24 years in urban areas and 15-16 years in the rural areas. There is a mix of predominantly Muslim, Dalit, Gujjar and Rajput communities inhabiting the Mewat region. The staff said that the Meo Muslims do not believe in marrying within the

family. In a typical Sunnati nikah* the groom goes to the bride's place with only a few close relatives to solemnize the wedding. This is followed by a feast called Walimah in the groom's house.

According to Noor Mohammad, founder of AMIED,*"Marriage is so central to a girl's life that they accept their situation, however unhappy they might be. Even extreme violence in accepted. Today marriages are not performed in the same village or in the same gotra. But, slowly Islamization is taking place and there are marriages within the 'Bua/ Mama' family. Mobile phones which distributed to children by the government have been taken away by parents so each home has a mobile, mostly in the hands of men. Despite these challenges the girls have started a conversation around child/early marriage, and we are seeing a serious pushback. The girls have even set up email accounts and have written personal stories to the state's Chief Minister, in an attempt to create political pressure. They are emerging as leaders, we are just helping them out".*

Rajasthan Mahila Kaamgaar (Kaamwali) Union (RMKU) is a registered Trade Union, established in 2008. It has strengthened, empowered and articulated the voice of domestic workers in their struggles over unfair wages and employment practices, workplace harassment, and domestic violence, thus carving a sustained political space for them in Rajasthan to organise workers and demand decent work, dignity, and a better life for themselves. The RMKU started with an initial strength of 500 women. Currently there are 40,000 women members with 35,000 from Jaipur and 5000 from Ajmer. It is among one of the largest organised effort of its kind. The union works in a simple manner. There are different collectives in different parts of Jaipur who meet at least once every month. Each collective has its own representative. The Union was at the frontlines of relief work for their members throughout the lockdown. Within the everyday pressures of relief, they sought to also find ways to systematically understand the 'needs' of their members, starting with the impact of the lockdown. The RMKU played a major role by extending access to cash transfers, providing food and housing relief to vulnerable communities in Jaipur during the Covid-19 pandemic. Leveraging

---

*The Sunnah way of Islamic marriage is to perform the Nikah in a Mosque with simplicity and in the presence of very close relatives. The family of both the bride and groom can feed the poor and any traveler who crosses by.

its institutional and community linkages, the union was also able to effectively liaise with and support informal, migrant and domestic workers dealing with loss of livelihoods, and form partnerships with the government to better deliver urban social protection measures.

Interaction with Mewa Bharati, the staff of RMKU and girls/women affected by the phenomenon, provided insights into the causes leadingto rushed marriages during Covid. They stated that the girls/women who are mainly from WB, UP, Bihar and Jaipur/Rajasthan. They beong to the lower socio-economic strata, mainly to the SC/OBC community. They are in the age group 19 to 30 years and their educational levels ranged from Std. IX to graduates.

WEST BENGAL

Nishtha means 'Dedication' in Bengali; it is dedicated towards empowering women to fight for equal rights, equal opportunities and equal dignity. Initiated in the year 1975 by Mrs. Pritilata Das, together with about 5 to 10 women, over the years Nishtha has come to be known as an organization for the women, by the women. Nishtha aims to enable sustainable development of marginalised and vulnerable girls and women by improving their quality of life through building social leadership, ensuring access to education, protection, healthcare provision, and economic self-reliance. Nishtha is also striving to work with boys and men because it believes that women's rights are not about women alone but about human rights. Currently Nishtha is working in 225 villages of 4 blocks: Baruipur, Bishnupur I, Magrahat II and

Sonarpur. The organisation's work is concentrated in 24 South Parganas, mainly with the rural population.

Cyclones Amphan and Yass, together with Covid led to a lot of destruction in South 24 Parganas. There was lack of food, loss of housing and destruction of land for cultivation. In Namkhana block for example, the saline water came onto the land and made it barren for cultivation. As, 70-75% of the population depend on agriculture for a living, they were compelled to look for alternative sources of income. Traffickers became very active during this time and lured young boys and girls with dreams of good living and food. Nishtha volunteers held rallies to stop VAW/G, child trafficking and child marriage, as well as advocated for equal distribution of food rations as Covid and hunger induced stress and job losses wreaked havoc in the area.

Interaction with the members of Nishtha team revealed that 24 Parganas, is an agricultural society. Mostly SC community reside in the area. There is rigid caste hierarchy in the villages. People are not educated, do not own land, and are not employed in well-paying jobs. The upper castes on the other hand, hold positions as senior officials, singers, business men. The situation of Muslim women and girls is worse. Child marriage, domestic violence, and alcoholism are common. Educational levels are not very high in rural areas. Though 80% girls are now completing their secondary

education, only 20-30 % are admitted in Senior Secondary and 15% in college. Girls' continue to get married at a much younger age i.e. as early as 13 years. During Covid, the age at marriage was even lower for both boys and girls. The Nishtha leaders asserted that in choice marriages – the age of boys and girls is nearly the same. But where arranged marriages are concerned, the boys are invariably much older than the girls. Sometimes the grooms are as old as 40 years old whereas the girls are much younger. Therefore, girls prefer to elope or have choice marriages.

Thoughtshop Foundation

Thoughtshop Foundation (TF) was set up in 1994. It applies design thinking to innovate programmes, communication strategies and games to transform lives of marginalized people and empower them for social change. Holistic development of young people has been a focus of TSFs work. The Youth Resource Cell (YRC) programme has been creating youth leaders invested in sustainable youth and community development since 2008. YRCs have supported young people over a period of 15 years, starting at age 6, to grow to their full potential. Children meet for weekly sessions in groups of 15 -20 members, to explore a range of themes focused on self, gender, sexuality and child rights. Older adolescents and youth are trained as Mentors to run the sessions using games, songs and stories. Young people are motivated to pursue higher education and linked with livelihood training opportunities. TF currently supports 2500 young people across 44 locations through 8 YRCs and 150 mentors. Between 2020 and 2022 a double disaster of the pandemic along with devastating Cyclones was experienced. TF stepped into disaster response including providing food support to all their communities; shelter support for homes damaged by the Amphan Cyclone in Namkhana / Mograhat blocks of South 24 Paragnas districts of West Bengal. TF also initiated a residential nursing training for girls who were at risk of being trafficked or married early enabling them to be employed. A Foundational learning education programme was also initiated for younger children who had been out of school for two years.

According to the members, mentors and girls of TF the majority of the people in the urban and peri urban areas are either domestic workers, rickshaw pullers or drivers. In the rural areas, both men and women are involved in agriculture. The women in rural Muslim households are generally confined to

their homes and their condition is deplorable. Child marriage, domestic violence, and alcoholism are common. Marriage of girls at the age of 13-14 years is sanctioned by religion and religious leaders, and is a norm. In South 24 Parganas, mostly lower caste, SC, people reside. There is a rigid caste system in the villages, whereas in the urban/peri urban areas, class hierarchies are common.

MAHARASHTRA

Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM) was co-founded by Dr. Manisha Gupte and Dr. Ramesh Awasthi in 1987 during their five year stay in the drought-prone Purandar block of Pune district. It evolved out of a commitment to women's rights within and outside the home. The organisation works with a feminist perspective and a human rights approach. Its primary belief is that people can resolve their own problems collectively with some amount of external support; thus, rather than create dependence on itself MASUM focuses on strengthening people's perspectives on democracy, equality, secularism and social justice. MASUM's community level involvement is primarily with rural women in perennially drought- prone areas of Pune and Ahmednagar districts of Maharashtra state. Acknowledging that women are not a homogenous category and that multiple systems of domination such as caste, class, religion and patriarchy operate in an intersectional manner, MASUM predominantly works with subordinated and minority-groups. Some of MASUM's on-going activities include women's right to health, savings and credit programme (SHGs), addressing gender based violence, building a progressive perspective among young people, and enhancing their rights in all areas of life. Men are encouraged to participate in MASUM's work, with women taking on leadership roles. All programmes are interconnected, so that people's human rights are realised in multiple ways.

The field staff of MASUM at Saswad office informed that the livelihood of

people residing in Saswad is mainly agriculture with 70% of the people involved in onion farming. Besides, there are a few private companies that provide employment. Majority of the younger generation are graduates, whereas the older generation is generally Std XII pass. In the rural areas, both boys and girls attain education till Std XIIth.

Reaching tertiary level is difficult for the girls as colleges offering graduate and post-graduate courses are situated at the block level and technical colleges are only in Pune. Age at marriage is generally 17-18 years for girls, whereas for boys, it is 25 years and above. There was no change in the age at marriage for boys during Covid. However, girls were married off at a younger age, even at around 15 years of age. Girls are socialized into believing that marriage is linked to attractive clothes, beautiful jewelry and make up. Social media also endorses this perspective.

Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KP) was registered in 2010 by Poornima Chikarmane, Lakshmi Narayanan and Shabana Diler who are the trustees. The vast majority of waste pickers in Pune are women, and Dalits, who have been invisible to society, faced discrimination, and worked without recognition for years. KP was set up primarily to support waste pickers and their families and their collectives. The support ranges from direct financial assistance to indirect support in the form of training, facilitation and research. KP is best described as a bridge, connecting people to each other, connecting ideas to people and people to resources to implement those ideas. It facilitates and celebrates interaction between one section of humanity to another, to create a better world for all. The core focus of the KP is the waste recycling sector. Waste pickers are the foot soldiers of this vast enterprise pyramid that collects, aggregates, trades and processes humongous quantities of unwanted materials discarded by consumers in growing economies. KP envisions a world that is non-discriminatory and socially just, economically equitable, environmentally sustainable, culturally plural, democratic, where diversity is valued and there is peace and harmony.

Interaction with KP office bearers, and karyakartas revealed that KP has its presence in 350 slums in Pune spread over 12 zones. Membership fee for the waste pickers is Rs. 200/year. With the onset of the pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns, the waste picker community became an extraordinarily vulnerable group as they neither had the option of working from home nor suspending work. They continued to provide the essential service of solid waste collection, exposing themselves to high risk of getting and transmitting the virus. The waste pickers were recognized as front line workers.

UTTAR PRADESH

Sadbhavana, or Sadbhavna Trust, was registered in 1990 by a group of social activists who had, for twenty years earlier, worked with the labouring poor of Mehrauli, Delhi. Since 2009 Sadbhavana Trust has been working with adolescent girls and women in slum areas across Old Lucknow mainly with minority (dalit) community and others communities on leadership roles. The Trust works for social transformation towards creating a more gender-just society. The main areas of work are empowerment of women and adolescent girls from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and enabling them to challenge patriarchal norms, change their own life circumstances and those of their communities. Sadbhavna Trust has also been involved with developing innovative strategies that lie at the intersections of gender, technology and community action to build leadership skills of young women. Its programs primarily focus on: skill development of

adolescent girls and young women from a feminist perspective; provision of legal aid and counselling to survivors of gender based violence; and youth mobilisation for initiating social change within their communities. Sadbhavana Trust worked tirelessly to help mitigate the devastation wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic. There was wide-scale disruption of girls' education due to the lack of resources and opportunities to study online, many dropping out altogether. The organization provided immediate emergency relief in the form of ration kits, and health and hygiene support to community girls and women and used social media platforms to disseminate science-based information regarding the pandemic to offer the community clarity in a time of crisis. Other strategies such as livelihood support which began as a crisis response have now grown into new areas of work or been integrated into their ongoing work.

According to Hameeda, Programme Director, Sadbhavna Trust, *"Marriage is central to a girl's life. The community believes that getting ready for marriage is the main purpose of their lives, and they should inculcate all the qualities of a 'good girl' and*

'goodwife', know how to stitch, embroider and cook. When the elder sister gets married, it is a foregone conclusion that the younger would drop out of school, and start gaining experience in skills needed to be a good home maker. Girls are also keen to get married as the family environment is inhibiting- they are forbidden from expressing themselves i.e. dancing, speaking in public or visiting friends. Though girls usually get married around the age of 18, but during Covid they were married off at the age of 14 or 15 years. Girls were not allowed to complete even Std X. Majority weddings during Covid were without the consent of girls. The money saved on weddings was often given as cash to the boy."

Section III: Causes of Rushed Marriages

Amid the Coronavirus epidemic, women's and girls vulnerabilities aggravated pre-existing gender-based propensities across the world. The gendered architecture of families furthered their process of marginalization within the family and community…Of particular concern were women and girls belonging to susceptible households located in different parts of the country.

Rushed marriages were an indirect consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic which highlighted the disproportionate impacts of disease outbreaks. The study underscores that lockdowns and curfews implemented to slow down disease transmission of Covid-19 pandemic resulted in extreme poverty and economic crises within households. Social distancing requirements, business closures and travel restrictions associated with Covid-19 led to the loss of livelihoods. The resulting economic insecurity severely curtailed the ability of parents to provide for their children. Households responded to economic insecurity in two ways: cutting expenditure (such as education costs) and reducing household size (UNICEF, 2021).

However, while economic crisis appeared to be the root cause, there were many other specific regional and cultural causes which pushed families to conduct rushed marriages. This section highlights (i) Commonalities across study sites in the causes for rushed marriages (ii) Disparities due to regional and cultural variations

Commonalities across study sites in the causes for rushed marriages

- **Household Poverty and Economic Crisis**

Deteriorating economic situation along with increasing food insecurity saw families opting for rushed marriages of girls as that meant 'one less mouth to feed.' These marriages were also an opportunity to transfer the family 'burden' to another family. There was an upper limit fixed by the government

as to the number of invitees in the baraat (wedding procession). Smaller baraats meant lesser expenditure.

Hence, a key driver of rushed marriages was a crisis-exacerbated increase in household poverty together with uncertain employment opportunities. A young bride narrated:

I belong to a poor family with scarcity of money and food but things became worse during the lockdown. My mother could not go out to work in other people's homes. My father was a wage laborer and he too could not find work. The financial problems mounted. I was 21 at that time. One of our relatives approached my father with a 'rishta' (proposal) for me. My father thought if he gets me marrie off it will reduce his financial burden. I told my father that I was not ready for marriage, but he would not listen to me. My parents constantly argued amongst themselves and with me. I was helpless and decided to get married….

- Uma, Rajasthan

One of the brides said:

I got married during the April 2021 lockdown along with my sister who is a year older to me. So two sisters were married to two brothers. The marriage was a rushed arrangement because the economic condition of our family was not very good. Usually at least 50 to 60 carloads of people come in a baraat but during Corona hardly one or 2 carloads came. One motorcycle was given as dowry between the two sisters. None of our friends came for the wedding, there were no fireworks, and no DJ and no wedding cards were printed.We did not have any fun…. I did not have time to get new clothes stitched. My sister's clothes had gone to the tailor for stitching but could not be picked up due to the lockdown! Many of our close relatives could not
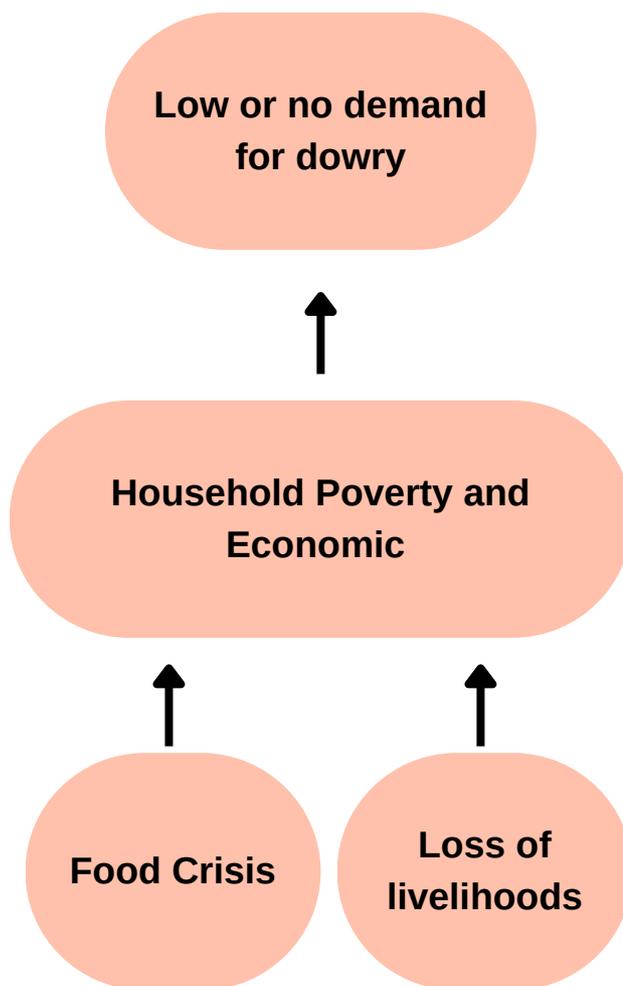
attend the wedding and some of the relatives do not even know till now that the marriages have taken place. A large amount of money was saved as there were hardly any guests. Even after the wedding there was no walimah (feast) hosted by the groom's family.

Some girls also opted to get married looking at the pathetic economic condition of their parents during lockdown. They realized that the parents were going through a tough time and felt that if they got married, they might reduce their parents' financial burden. In the urban context, particularly in Jaipur and Maharashtra, girls sensed that they were a burden even though it was never said in so many words. Some girls took the decision to elope because of this reason.

### (i)	No demand for dowry during Covid

Another reason for rushed marriages during Covid was that there was either no demand or reduced demand for dowry at the time of marriage. Many a time the boy and his family also did not demand dowry directly but asked for it indirectly. Such was the hurry that parents did not do any due diligence either about the boy or his family.

Asma, U.P. was 17-year-old when her marriage was arranged in a hurry by her parents. Her mother was a domestic worker, and father a carpenter. They were not well off. During Covid, a boy in the same colony showed interest in marrying Asma. Her parents felt that it was a good alliance. The boy's family thought that the money saved by Asma's family on the wedding would be given as cash to their son. Asma's family, however, had agreed to the marriage because there was no talk of dowry when the proposal had been sent. This miscommunication proved to be unfortunate for Asma. She was tortured for not bringing any dowry. She became pregnant soon after marriage but was made to undergo an abortion. Asma returned to her natal family who took her to a doctor. Once she felt better, Asma's parents sent her back to her marital home where the same torture continued. She soon became pregnant again and gave birth toa daughter. "*I was blamed for that too and the violence worsened*" says she.

### (ii)	Reverse migration due to loss of livelihoods

There was a mass exodus of migrant workers from the cities to villages

during the lockdown. With an uncertain future and no source of daily income during the pandemic, the migrants came back to their villages with empty pockets. The pandemic pushed many of them into survival mode. This increased the urgency to marry off the girls as they suddenly became more visible to them. Parents saw marriage as a coping mechanism to protect their daughters against unwanted advances and sexual abuse.

Community members stated that the return of migrant workers, especially young boys added to anxieties related to girls' safety within households. Groups/ clusters of boys would pass lewd comments on their girls when they stepped out of their homes. In these adverse situations, rushed marriages were seen as a solution to protect girls for fear of stigma arising from various forms of abuse, including sexual assault.

Besides, girls became more visible to the returning male migrant workers within their homes. Fathers and brothers who had left home 2-3 years prior to Covid suddenly felt that the girls had grown up.

- **Staff of MJAS, Ajmer**

During lockdown my father and brothers lost their jobs. Everybody was at home. There were 5 more members in the house and five more mouths to feed…with increasing food scarcity there were endless arguments and sometimes violence. One day my father told me that being the eldest I should get married, as it would ensure financial security for me in the future. Then the family began pressurizing me. Neither my consent nor my age, which was 15 years at that time, was taken into consideration. I was left with no option and got married against my wishes.

- ***Bulbul, West Bengal***

(iii)   Lure of a good alliance and expenses borne by the boy's family

The lure of a good alliance and the groom's family agreeing to bear all expenses related to the wedding was another reason which propelled parents to conduct rushed marriages of their girls. One of the staff at MASUM spoke about 20-year-old Nisha's wedding during Covid. Nisha had completed her General Nursing and Midwifery (GNM) course. She was married off to a distant relative in 2020. Her parents did not try to find out

where the boy was working or how much he was earning. They relied on a relative who said that the 'match' was good as the boy lived in a big house and was doing well. The marriage took place within 10 days. "The fact that it was good 'rishta' (proposal), minimal wedding expenses, no demand for dowry, and all expenditure taken care of by the boy's side, pushed the mother to get Nisha married in a hurry. Also, Nisha had a younger sister and she thought that getting at least one daughter married would reduce her responsibility considerably".

I am 23 years old and XII pass. I got married in June 2020. The financial position of my natal family is not good. My marriage was an arranged one. My father in law knew my uncle (mama). A lot of money was saved. All the marriage expenses including food, jewelry, was taken care of by the boy's family. There was no DJ. The Baraat consisted of 50 people. The wedding ceremony took place on the terrace of his family home."

- Khushi, Maharashtra

(iv) Unpaid labour of girls

This study highlights that the productive capacities of newly married young brides are central to the functioning of the household economy, as she is utilized for unpaid work in the house while the rest of the family works in the fields or seeks paid employment. Also, in most rural study locations, young girls were compelled to take on the role of caretakers/homemakers as well as farm workers. This made rushed marriages even more desirable for families.

I am the youngest of 2 sisters and 2 brothers. I was 16 years old and studying in Std X when I was married off during Covid to Arpit. He was 19 years old and studying in Grade 11. His mother expired during the 2nd wave of Covid. There was no one to do the household chores…now I do all the work…

- Indu, UP

I was married when I was only 9 years old. I continued to stay in my natal home after marriage and completed Std XII from regular school. During Covid my father in law passed away, leaving behind only my mother in law. The latter had to perform all the household chores. Besides, the marital

family owned a cow which needed looking after. My mother-in-law began making frequent calls to my father to arrange my Gauna. I wanted to study further, but her wish prevailed. So, my Gauna was arranged. I now perform all the household chores including looking after the cow.

- Rita, Rajasthan

Uncertainty of the future/death of parents

Another striking reason behind rushed marriages was the uncertainty of the future. No one knew when the pandemic would be over and how long the lockdown period would stretch. This added to the woes of the parents. Families were frightened, especially after the 2nd wave of the pandemic. Fathers and grandfathers thought, if they die, what will happen to their family? Many fathers stated that they were not confident that their sons would solemnise the weddings of their daughters. They therefore felt that it was better to get them married quickly, despite the pandemic. In one village a woman who had lost her brother, a father of four, in March 2021 said that when schools closed, one of her nieces was left at home all day while her brother's wife worked in the fields. *I tried to get my niece married for her own safety,*" the woman asserted.

In many families the parents/ grandparents felt they might not outlive the pandemic and were willing to accept any good proposal at that time. Moreover, social customs of delaying the wedding in the event of a death in the family and the fear that the 'good match' would be lost, also triggered an increase in rushed marriages.

Chanda's mother Pooja lives in Saswad, Maharashtra. She is a domestic worker and her husband is a daily wage worker. She got her daughter Chanda married during Covid at the age of 19 years to Amit, a post graduate who worked as a peon for an advocate. Chanda had completed Std XII. The family had gone to a mela (village fair) just before the lockdown in March 2020. Amit saw Chanda and liked her. The families also liked each other. Pooja's mother in law was very sick during lockdown. This was the reason she decided to get Chanda married off in a hurry. If her mother in law had passed away, then as per the customs of their community the marriage would have to be postponed for 3 years.

My parents died when I was very young, leaving me an orphan. I then began living with my grandparents. During the pandemic my grandfather became very agitated, he said he was getting old and might die. He constantly complained that times were uncertain….so I was forced to enter into marriage with a man who was already married and had a 5-year-old child.

- Shivani, Rajasthan

Parental death due to Covid-19 also led to many girls being orphaned. They were being looked after by grandparents or extended family members who were struggling financially or unwilling to care for them. In most cases the girls were made to drop out of school or discontinue online classes and married off, hurriedly.

I lost my father during my childhood. My mother would eke out a living by cooking in other people's homes. She made sure I went to school because she wanted me to grow up and take up a good job. She often said that her daughter is bright and would grow up and become an officer. During Covid schools shut down but she encouraged me to continue my studies through the online platform. However, I lost her to Covid in 2021. Then my mother's brother who lived close by took me to his house. He had four children of his own. He said he could neither afford to send me to school nor provide me with a smart phone. I was made to give up my studies. He soon found a boy who was non-literate and forced me to marry him during the pandemic.

- Sana, Rajasthan

Control over women's/girl's sexuality

Marriage as an institution is central to our society and continues to be propagated as the only legitimate way for expressing and experiencing sexuality. Intrinsic to the cultural norms followed by most communities and families, the beliefs and values around marriage shape the upbringing of children and the course of their gendered lives. Rushed marriages during Covid were a particularly stark example of how social norms and practices governed the lives of many girls by imposing control over their sexuality, cutting short their dreams, hopes and aspirations.

I *was in a relationship since I was 15 years old. The financial condition of my family was very poor. During Covid my parents said I should get married to my father's friend's son Aneel, who was 17 years old. It is then that I told them about my relationship with Karan. My father was furious! He said Karan did not belong to the same caste as ours and if the community members got wind of this, it would bring shame and dishonor to the family. He also threatened me with dire consequences in case I considered eloping with Karan. A lot of violence was unleashed on me and they finally pushed me into this marriage. I had never liked Aneel but was forced to marry him.*

-Sonia, Maharashtra

"We have to understand the centrality of the institution of marriage in Indian society. Everything revolves around marriage. Traditionally, society has wanted to control sexuality, reproductive ability and labour capacity of both men and women, and marrying them off at a very young age was the best way tto exercise control. As for the impact of Covid-19, when the pandemic was raging, there was a big upswing in early 'Gauna' as economic distress and deaths in families required that extra helping hand. Then when the lockdown was eased, there was a spate of rushed underage marriages. This was because adolescent girls sitting at home were considered a big risk. Also, the confidence and power of negotiation of girls reduced as their school routine was broken and there was emotional pressure due to distress in the family."

- Indira Pancholi, Founding Member, MJAS Ajmer

The case above brings to light the typical mindset of parents that, girls might elope and marry outside their caste or religion. This also drove parents to force their children into rushed marriages.

"I was studying in Std VIII when Covid struck. I often used my mother's phone to study. But my parents thought I was talking to boys. They disapproved of this strongly…. they quickly found a boy for me. I had always

dreamt of completing schooling and going in for higher education. I wanted to stand on my feet… one morning they announced that the marriage ceremony would take place in a month's time. I pleaded with them to wait at least till I completed school. However, they insisted that I get married. Overnight I was made to leave school. I also lost contact with all my friends and was married off to a stranger. My parents didn't perform my 'Gauna' but sent me to my marital home immediately after my marriage."

- Kareena, Rajasthan

Shilpa, a mother from Maharastra narrated:

"My daughter Deepa is Std X pass and she married Manish in Nov 2020. She had completed her ANM course and was working in a hospital in the Pediatric Department before her marriage. There were a lot of proposals coming for Deepa before Covid. But she kept refusing each one of them. Then her father spoke to her and she told him about Manish. Initially I was not very happy. Then I found out about his family and accepted the alliance. No dowry was asked for or given. I thought that it is better to accept the boy and get them married. Elopement would have brought a lot of shame and disgrace on the family."

The lockdown and school closure

The countrywide closure of educational institutions including schools and colleges affected a large majority of students across geographies. The impact of the pandemic was heavily gendered. There was wide-scale disruption of girls' education due to the lack of resources and opportunities to study online, many dropped out altogether. Across the study locations, schools effectively remained closed for seven months and more, with the education sector facing extraordinary challenges. The delivery of various school-based schemes like mid-day meals, school health programmes and scholarships were affected adversely due to the pandemic. The country experimented with finding solutions to address the situation by initiating e-learning platforms through the digital space. For many girls, access to these forums was difficult. Despite various challenges faced by girls during the lockdown period, most of them seemed eager to get back to schools when

they reopened (IDSJ, 2020). The economic constraints families went through in such times led them to adopt negative coping mechanisms, like getting the girls married off. The lockdown and closure of schools also meant that girls were out of the protective net of school, raising fears for their physical safety and concerns about threats to their sexual purity and, consequently, 'family honour.' (Jeejebhoy, 2021).

Heads of several organisations met during the study asserted that, a large majority of parents felt that there was no use and no point in online education. They were worried about the safety of their daughters who were sitting at home and thought it was better to get them married rather than keeping them at home, as this might lead to ignominy for the family. There were no deterrents; no police, no teachers, and no vigilance committees. Childline, was not functional so underage marriages could also be performed. Childline reported a 17% increase in distress calls related to early marriage of girls in June and July in 2020 compared to 2019 (BBC, 2020). The police and the government machinery were busy with the implementation of the lockdown. They did not actively work to prevent marriages, especially early age rushed marriages. Because of the lockdown restrictions, it was difficult for the organizations working on the ground to reach the villages in time. The result was that there were many underage girls who were rushed into marriage by parents during this time.

Many girls felt that, the effect of the lockdown was felt only by them. They were burdened with more household work as their mobility was restricted and they were stuck at home. School closure not only led to break in education but also meant a disruption of the girls' own spaces.

I was in XIth grade during Covid. I wanted to complete my schooling and sit for competitive exams. My dream was to become an IPS officer. I was married during my childhood together with 6-7 siblings. During Covid, the schools were closed. My in-laws pressurized my parents to send me to my marital home. My parents forced me to drop out of school putting an end to my education. My Gauna was performed overnight…all my dreams were shattered!

- Gauri, Rajasthan

Choice Marriage

Narratives across states underscore that marriage is so central that young adults themselves are often eager for it. Several girls said they dream about having a 'love marriage'. But for many others, marriage is also a means to satisfy sexual desires or access the mobility and freedom reserved for adults; in addition, there is often a deep desire for the romance associated with the act and the ritual of marriage itself. There were many girls who married a person of their choice during the lockdown. Whether it was to get out of the drudgery of housework or the constant fights at home, or the lure of a better life with a loved one, girls took the step to run away and get married.

In a stringently patriarchal society like ours, girls are socialized into believing that marriage is the 'be all end all' of their existence. Social norms are very strong and girls are considered a burden. Since childhood they are told that they do not belong to their natal home- but to their sasural (marital home). They start to spin dreams around their marriage from an early age. They dream of putting sindoor, dressing up, having deeply satisfying sexual relations, greater mobility, taking decisions, and having a happy family.

- Mina Das, Secretary, Nishtha

I ran away from home during the second wave of Covid. At that time, I was 17 years old and studying in Std XI. The boy was my distant relative, therefore, from the same caste. We had met several times and had sexual relations. I had told my family that I liked him and wanted to marry him, but the family wasn't keen. According to them, the boy's family was not of the same 'standard' as ours. We both met outside the school and decided to get married…

- Indu, Rajasthan

A mother narrated that her daughter got married during the pandemic when she was 16 years old even though there was no pressure from the family/community. She wanted to be with her boyfriend. Her sexual need drove her to get married…. After marriage there has been a lot of harassment and mental torture. She has to perform all the household chores and a lot of limitations and constraints have been imposed upon her. The in-laws insist that she wear only traditional clothes. There are also restrictions on her physical mobility.

- Rajni, West Bengal

During Covid, I was only 15 years old and my parents' arranged my marriage to a man who was 40 years old. I tried to plead with them to not force me into a future that was doomed. But they did not agree. They argued that the man was well settled and had a good job. My boyfriend and I had earlier decided that we would wait to complete our schooling before thinking of getting married. I spoke to my boyfriend and we both eloped and got married in a temple.

- Anushree, West Bengal

II.   Disparities due to regional variations

The previous section highlights how poverty and economic crisis, closure of schools, control over girls sexuality and unpaid labour of girls were the common causes that led to rushed marriages. However, the specific contextual reality of a particular state, especially at the time of the pandemic also shaped the nature of rushed marriages.

The following section delineates the variations in the phenomenon of rushed marriages, across states and cultures.

West Bengal

(i)   Dual disaster: Amphan and Covid together

According to the TF staff, Cyclone Amphan led to a number of areas in the Sundarbans region being washed away. In most cases, agriculture had become unviable due to rising sea levels and the resultant increase in the salinity of the water. Many people were displaced and forced to migrate due to financial insecurity and vulnerabilities. As a result, families tried to marry off their young daughters, in the hope of settling them and also relieving the family of their ' burden'. With both the Covid-19 pandemic and Cyclone

Amphan striking at the same time, the number of marriages, increased exponentially due to uncertainty of the future. Many of these marriages were arranged in haste.

According to Mina Das, "traffickers were aware of this vulnerability and they exploited the situation. Greater number of marriages took place during Covid, especially in the 1st phase of lockdown, but 50% marriages were **'fake marriages'**. Girls were trafficked in the name of marriage. Most of them are currently engaged in sex trade in either Delhi or Pune.

A mother narrated: *"First the pandemic hit us and then Amphan. During the pandemic my husband who worked as a rickshaw puller lost his job and was unable to find employment for many months. With only a tent as cover for my seven-member family following the super cyclone and no money for food, the marriage proposal for my young daughter seemed godsend. We were desperate and quickly got her daughter married. We were relieved to see her go to her in-laws place."*

(ii) Unhappy family environment

The study partners in West Bengal also informed that a large number of people in their areas especially in 24 Paraganas live in particularly unhappy family environments. This became one of the causes for rushed marriages in West Bengal.

I grew up seeing a lot of violence at home including sexual violence. No one ever loved me or cared for me. My mother was in a relationship outside of marriage. There was no focus on education. During Covid, I was home all the time, the violence within my family escalated I felt very scared and lonely. I spoke about my situation to my boyfriend. He was very understanding. I thought at least he cared for me and did not judge me despite knowing my reality. I decided to marry him....

- Bidisha, West Bengal

> A major issue in 24 paraganas area is that families are dysfunctional. Typically, the father is a drunkard and has a relationship outside marriage. The mothers are very young (probably have gone through early/child marriage themselves) and are constantly struggling to find better-paying jobs. Some have not been able to fulfil their own aspirations and dreams Many of them have left their husbands and entered into relationships outside marriage resulting in neglected children with no one to give them love and affection. Girls generally do not aspire for higher education or work as they lack exposure. They are not aware of how to deal with situations of violence and suffer from very low self-esteem. All these situations were exacerbated during Covid.
>
> **- Himalini Varma, Director TSF**

The TF staff members reported several incidents where young girls opted for rushed marriages during Covid due to the sheer neglect they had faced all their lives. The situation was heightened during Covid. For instance, they narrated the case of a 15-year-old girl who got married during the lockdown. Her father was an alcoholic, and the mother never tended to her emotional needs. So, she ran away with a boy who was already married and with a child.

(iii)   Desire for sexual gratification

Discussions with TF staff revealed that typically people live in small houses but during the pandemic they ended up sharing their homes. With migrant workers returning home and the locals having lost their homes because of Amphan, there were situations where 4 members slept on a single bed and 4 more on the floor. Children were therefore, prematurely exposed to sexual activity.

I was 14 years old during the pandemic. My parents and I lived with my grandparents. My three elder sisters were married. However, during Covid all my sisters, their husbands and grown up children also came to stay with us. We lived in a small 2 room house, with barely enough space for all of us. There was one bed in my grandparents room and one in my parent's room. Suddenly there were too many people at home. I found five people sleeping

on the bed and five below the bed. There was too much sexual activity around me. I did not know how to deal with my sexual desires or the emotional upheaval within me. I called up my boyfriend and told him I wanted to get married. Knowing that my parents would never approve of him, we ran away and got married in a hurry, in a temple.

- Bipasha, West Bengal

Maharashtra

The reasons for rushed marriages in Maharashtra were in complete contrast to those in West Bengal. Instant unplanned marriages known as Yadi pe Shaadi along with mama-bua alliances which are characteristic of the state and a norm, increased manifold due to the uncertainty of the future during Covid times.

(i)Yadi Pe Shadi (Instant marriage)

Rushed marriages are of two types and are becoming a norm: Yaadi pe shaadi and Getkin shaadi (gate cane). In both traditionally the girls' family claims that the boy is coming to see the girl. However, the marriage is solemnized during the 2-3 hour period. Among sugarcane cutters – gate cane marriages are more common. Earlier both types of marriages took place within 48 hours but now take place in 2-3 hours. Boys of farmers are unable to get girls in marriage from the same area. They get girls from Marathwada. This is considered below their status. Marriages are solemnized in haste so that people do not get to know about this fact".

- Manisha Gupte, Co-founder MASUM

In our area Yadi pe Saadi is more prevalent. In such marriages typically there is no dowry, no big crowd, there is minimum expenditure and the marriage is very simple. Both sides have a closed door meeting. They list out the things to be done by the groom's side and by the bride's side. This listing is called Yadi and so the name Yadi pe Shadi. These customary marriages increased exponentially during Covid-19 due to the uncertainty of the future.

- Staff of MASUM

I was 23 years old when I got married in August 2020. It was a love cum arranged marriage. Sunil and I knew each other for 3 years. Both of us worked for an agency which arranges Melas (gatherings) where boys and girls come to find partners according to their requirements. Our parents agreed to the alliance. My parents, sister and I went to see Sunil's parents during the lockdown to plan the wedding. Sunil who was looking after sales in a gold shop, had lost his job during Covid and so had his father. Besides, Sunil's grandfather had fallen very sick so Sunil's family insisted that we get married then and there. Both Sunil and I took about half an hour to think whether we should go ahead with this rushed marriage. I thought that although the parents have agreed to get us married just now, what if they change their minds when the lockdown ends? So both of us agreed to get married. Both Sunils and my parents listed out the things to be done by each of our families.. I went to his house at 2 p. m, and got married at 7 p.m. in a saree which my mother in law gave me at that time. Sunil's relatives lived in the same area so around 50-60 people attended the wedding. There was no time for henna, jewelry and there was no DJ. There was a photographer and a pandit, and the haldi ceremony was conducted at home.

- Geeta, Maharashtra

(i) Mama/ Bua alliances (alliances with children of paternal aunts and maternal uncles

It is in the culture of the state that marriages are arranged between cousins (mama and bua's children). The parents feel secure that the marriage is within a known family and to a known boy/girl. Such alliances are generally decided during childhood. Dowry is both demanded and given, but all unofficially. Money is also transacted. Expenses on the marriage are generally borne by the girl's family.

- Staff of KP, Pune

> *I was having an affair. During Covid my parents overheard me speaking to my boyfriend on the phone. They did not approve of my relationship and were afraid that I might elope. There was opposition from the boy's side also. Though we were of the same caste, his family was better off economically and better educated. My parents married me off quickly to my Bua's son within a period of 8 days. They said the proposal had been fixed during our childhood.*
>
> **- Saraswati**

In another case reported by the staff of KP, Maharashtra, Kalyani got married to Ashok, her bua's son in August 2020. She was a graduate in chemistry and was working with Mahindra Insurance. Kalyani belongs to a joint family. Her father passed away when she was 6 years old, and all household decisions were taken by her chacha (paternal uncle). There are 25 members in her family including eight sisters. Four are already married. When Kalyani's sister's marriage was being arranged, the bua told Kalyani's uncle that she wanted at least one girl from this family to get married to her son. So Kalyani's marriage was arranged during Covid in a hurry.

Rajasthan

In Rajasthan the study underscored several intra-state variations. While it is customary to marry two or more daughters together among the Meo Muslims of Alwar region, Ajmer and adjoining districts follow the 'Aata Saata' form of marriage. However, the increase in sheer numbers of both kinds of alliances during Covid was alarming! Another striking feature was that though a large number of child/early marriages take place in the state, the age of 'Gauna' which had been considerably increased prior to Covid was again reduced. Many girls were sent off to their marital homes immediately after marriage due to fear of ignominy.

(i) Marrying two or more siblings to save dowry.

At many places three to five siblings were married together in a hurry, to save money spent on the wedding. Only one wedding feast had to be given by the parents which helped them save money. In such cases, generally the oldest sibling was of legal marriageable age whereas the youngest one was invariably underage. Today, dowry is an important aspect of the marriage. People even sell land to give dowry. Most common dowry comprises a motorcycle. Since Alwar is largely an agriculture-based district, the boys' family have now started demanding a Bolero car or a tractor. During the Covid period, it was

> very common to see multiple siblings getting married to save money on dowry. Uncertainty of the future was another reason behind multiple sibling marriages being conducted in a hurry.
>
> - **Staff Members, AMIED**

> *I was forced to get married by my parents when my elder sister was getting married to save money and to save dowry. We got married to 2 brothers. I was just 16 at that time and had dreamt of marrying a man with a proper job. My parents had to give a motorcycle as dowry. Only 10-12 people came for the wedding. In normal or non-Covid times at least 500 or more people would have attended our wedding. My sister has gone to the marital home while I have been able to negotiate for a delayed Gauna.*
>
> **- Abida, Rajasthan**

(ii) Aata saata marriages and rushed Gauna

Aata saata is a system where a family enters into an alliance for their daughter only when the other family pledges to marry one of their own daughters into the boy's family. The age of the girls offered in matrimony does not matter. The brother gives his sister in marriage to a man whose sister is in exchange taken by him as his wife.

Staff of MJAS narrated

Nidhi Bairwa from a village in Rajasthan was married to Lakshman in exchange for Lakshman's sister Mira's wedding to her brother Hukku. So a brother and sister from one family were pledged in marriage to a brother and sister of another family. Though the marriage had been fixed in their childhood, Nidhi had never met Lakshman. However, when Covid struck there was acute pressure on her family to perform the marriage of Hukku to Mira as Mira's father had taken very ill. He feared that he might die without seeing his daughter's marriage. At that time Nidhi was only 16 years old whereas Lakshman was 30 years of age. She was studying in Class X and wanted to complete her studies but Lakshman's family performed the wedding in a hurry.Nidhi says she could never like Lakshman as he was too old…

Uttar Pradesh

In Uttar Pradesh the staff of Sadbhavna Trust stated that they work in the urban slums of Lucknow, primarily with the the Muslim Minority community.

There is strict caste adherence as a norm, and lower castes do not marry their children into upper castes. The same is also true of the upper castes, who do not marry their children among the lower castes. However, during Covid many inter-caste marriages took place in a hurry to save family honour.

Whenever any disaster occurs, girls are married off in a hurry. Like after riots in Muzaffarpur, we saw both girls and boys were married off in droves. Sexuality of girls is viewed as the most dangerous factor. People feel that marriage is the only way to control it. 'Izzat' or family 'honour' is another reason. Many inter-caste marriages took place during Covid which otherwise would never have been allowed. Besides, poverty and economic crisis faced by households was a big reason why parents rushed their daughters into marriage – prospective bridegrooms living in their own house, having a government job, or any of his family members having a good job. They were viewed as a 'good' catch. Parents felt that at least the girl would not go hungry. The age or consent of girls was never taken into consideration.
Hameeda, Sadbhavna Trust

Sabeena has four brothers and one sister. Afzal is the only child of his parents. Both lived in Lucknow. Sabeena had completed her graduation and was preparing for a government job when she met Afzal. They became friends and decided to spend their lives together. Even though they were both from the same minority group, they belonged to different castes. Sabeena belonged to a higher caste and Afzal to a lower. Both sabeena and Afzal's family members were against the match. They thought an inter-caste marriage would destroy and change future generations. Also, Afzal's family expected to huge dowry as he was their only son.

Then Covid struck. Both the families agreed to bury their differences and agreed to get them married lest they had a runaway marriage which would bring shame and dishonour to the families. Afzal's family was however, extremely disappointed as they did not get much dowry. Sabeena was also unhappy as she faced both physical and mental abuse post marriage.

In another case **Sadia** *was married off during Covid at the age 16 to a man who was 40 years old. She had no knowledge about sexual intercourse. However, the man owned a house. That was the reason Sadia's parents got her married to him. Now he is really troubling her. He wants sex around 4-5 times a day. She is tired and harassed and has begun to wonder if her parent's decision for marrying her off in order to provide her a roof above her head was a fair one and the only possible alternative...*

In yet another case the parents of Mahira got to know that the boy's father had a government job. The acute poverty of their household and food scarcity pushed them to marry off Mahira in a hurry, 'Ladki bhookon toh nahin maregi' (at least the girl will not die of hunger) they lamented.

Conclusion

Covid-19 pandemic resulted in extreme poverty and economic crises especially for those belonging to the most vulnerable castes and class groups in all the four states covered by the study. The existing gender disparities within families and communities were heightened to further girls' and women's susceptibilities. Of particular concern, were women and girls belonging to the most marginalised castes and class. However, the study highlights that while economic crisis appears as a root cause for rushed marriages, several other factors pushed families to conduct rushed marriages. There were also regional variations in the nature of rushed marriages, along with inter and intra state cultural differences. It is apparent that the traditional/ customary forms of marriage like early marriage and Gauna which had reduced over time, once again surfaced and increased exponentially in Covid times due to uncertainty of the future. Many ritiuals like the presence of the pandit, or the haldi ceremony, which are considered essential during weddings were bypassed by families entering into rushed marriages.

In arriving at a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of 'Rushed Marriages' the study identifies a number of factors represented at the individual, familial, community, and societal levels and underscores how these factors intersected with each other to result in the phenomenon of 'rushed marriages. It is apparent that Covid-19 exposed societal fault lines. Social and economic disadvantages worked synergistically with pre-existing

chronic conditions to magnify existing inequalities within and between cultures. Increased poverty and unemployment at the family level, girls seen as a 'burden' and marriage viewed as 'one less mouth to feed' was the central cause behind rushed marriages. Besides, the lockdown restrictions meant that parents were spared from spending on big weddings or on dowry and got the opportunity to organize very small weddings, during which two or three siblings or cousins (irrespective of their age) were married off. Also economic distress and deaths in families required that extra helping hand in the form of unpaid labour of girls. Uncertainty of the future during the pandemic and the emotional pressure from elders of the family who wanted to see their children/ grandchildren married off before something happened to them also increased the numbers of rushed marriages. Prolonged school closure, the urge to save family 'honour, inadequate state laws and community breakdown have been identified as some other factors behind the spike in rushed marriages. Another reason, cited by parents and community members, in several field areas was that marriage was seen as a safety net at a time when many young men were out of jobs and seen harassing young girls/ posing a danger to them in several places. In most rushed marriages arranged by parents the age of girls or the consent of girls was never taken into consideration. However, in some cases girls also exercised their agency and opted to marry partners of their choice and enter into rushed marriages. All these factors amplified the stress and tensions at multiple levels leading to increased prevalence of rushed marriage.

Section IV: Multi-faceted Consequences of Rushed marriages

As has happened in all of history, women bear the most serious consequences of any humanitarian crisis, and yet it is their stories that get the least visibility. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the particularly disadvantaged position of women and girls and the various forms of violence they were subjected to, especially due to rushed marriages…

This section traces the surfeit of consequences on the lives of girls who went through rushed marriages during the pandemic. It narrates the stories of some of the girls who got married and continued to stay in the marital homes, and of those who returned to their natal homes when the marriages went south. It is evident that for many women, Covid-19 increased the load of housework and care work for children, the elderly, and ill family members. Restrictions on movement, financial constraints, and widespread insecurity also encouraged abusers, giving them additional power and control (Marques et al, 2020). The home often became a place of fear and abuse.

On April 6, 2020 in her statement Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Executive Director of UN Women said, "With 90 countries in lockdown, four billion people are now sheltering at home from the global contagion of Covid-19. It's a protective measure, but it brings another deadly danger. We see a shadow pandemic growing, of violence against women" (UN WOMEN) .This 'shadow pandemic' can be seen in a spike in domestic violence as girls and women are sheltering-in-place with their abusers (UN Foundation, 2020). Another UN Press Release points out, Covid-19 has made an already difficult situation for millions of girls even worse. Shuttered schools, isolation from friends and support networks, and rising poverty have added fuel to a fire the world was already struggling to put out (UNICEF, 2021).

Not all girls/women interviewed for the study were underage. Many were in the age group of 25 to 30 years. However, the peculiar circumstances during Covid-19 had pushed them into rushed marriages. Since the marriages had been performed two years prior to the study the impact of their marriages

was beginning to sink in only now. Many of them (both in marriages to unknown men and those who married men of their choice) were forced to give up their education; they could not work or keep their jobs; their sexual and reproductive health was compromised due to forced pregnancies as a large majority of them had conceived immediately after marriage and given birth to babies. Malnourished mothers with malnourished babies was a common sight in many locations. The myriad forms of gender based violence inflicted upon them including physical, mental and sexual, undermined their agency and sense of self. Those married to complete strangers without their consent, had to cope with unwanted physical and sexual touch and this impacted their mental health. Some AGYW had also been put to tremendous emotional pain caused by the pressure to bring in more dowry once the lockdown was lifted and men in their natal families had resumed work. Yet others, suffered because they were unable to meet the expectations of the marital families. However, there were several girls who were happily married – those who had opted for 'choice marriages' or eloped with boyfriends or and even among those who went through rushed marriages arranged by the parents.

Made to Discontinue Education

Education is viewed as an important element in women's and girls' economic empowerment, autonomy and even long-term health. With schools closing during the Covid-19 pandemic, children and young adults had to stay home. This adversely impacted girls' health and well-being as they were cut off from both their friends and teachers. Overburdened with household chores, many could not pursue online classes. Others were constantly concerned about how they would return to school after the lockdowns. However, education of girls became secondary in homes where job losses and increased economic insecurity led to rushed marriages to ease the financial burden. The dreams of many girls were crushed, along with their childhoods.

Several girls in each of the four states visited said that even when online classes were held in schools, parents did not allow them to attend. Many parents could not afford to give them smart phones and several girls were forced to discontinue their schooling completely.

In one incident, Sajani from U.P. was married off hurriedly to a complete

stranger by her parents when she was in Std. XII. "I wanted to complete my schooling and go for higher education and become a teacher. But I was made to leave school during Covid and marry a man who was much older to me. I feel no connection with him. *Hum compatible nahin hain.* (We are not compatible) I hate his touch and refuse his sexual advances…. then there is physical abuse. I have lost my freedom and feel worthless".

In another case, Neha Gujar (Rajasthan) was in Std. XI when Covid struck, her dream was to grow up and join the police force. During Covid, the schools were closed. She could not join online classes. Her Gauna was arranged overnight and her education got disrupted.

Loss of employment

Many girls who had rushed marriages lost their jobs or had to give up working. Samira (Maharashtra) got married to her cousin Saif. Samira, was Std. XII pass and had been working for an E-mitr seva kendra. She was forced to leave her job after marriage since Saif did not want her to work. He said that no girl in his family went out of the house to work. Samira was not the only one to follow that tradition. Several girls who had rushed marriages were made to give up their jobs/careers even if there was acute financial crisis, *"Ghar ki bahu kaam karne jayegi to ghar ki izzat mitti mein mil jayegi"* (If the daughter in law of the house goes out to work, the honour of the family will be ruined) was a common refrain.

Rekha (Maharashtra) married Sumit in Nov 2020. She has completed her Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife (ANM) course and was working in a hospital in the Pediatric department before marriage. Sumit's family insisted that she leave her job after marriage. "I was not only made to leave my job but was robbed of my identity. I loved meeting my friends and colleagues daily in the hospital and I miss the lunch hour when we shared tiffin. I conceived soon after marriage. I don't like spending all my time with the baby and performing house work. I want to go back to work," says she.

However, not all women were unhappy about losing their jobs and staying at home.

26-year-old Arti (Rajasthan) is happy with her marriage. She has completed

her M.Com, and was working with Axis bank. She had to leave her job after marriage when she gave birth to a child. "My husband, helps in household work and in looking after the baby. I will resume work once the baby is a little older," says Arti.

Harassment for Dowry, post the marriage

As discussed in the previous section, there was little or no demand for dowry at the time of the weddings during Covid. However, many girls faced extreme harassment and mental torture to bring dowry from their parents once the lockdowns were lifted and the situation normalized somewhat.

Amina Sheikh (West Bengal) is 21 years old. She was married off against her wishes during the lockdown at the age of 19 years. "I was never accepted by my in laws because my parents did not give any dowry at the time of my marriage. Both my father and mother-in-law kept telling my husband that I am no good and he began torturing me. I was abused both verbally and physically. Once the lockdown was lifted, my mother-in-law saw many boys were getting remarried to girls who were bringing hefty dowry. So, she convinced my husband to have a second marriage. I had conceived by that time, but was kept hungry and not given food. My parents did not come to help me. When I just could not take this treatment any more, I somehow managed to inform the didis at Nishtha and they came to help me. My in-laws agreed to give me a house and a small allowance for my baby's upkeep and promised to stop torturing me. However, the torture continues, I did not get a house and live in my marital home along with my husband's second wife. I feel neglected and humiliated and cry a lot." Says Amina.

Unwanted Pregnancy and childbirth

In all the states, a large majority of girls who had rushed marriages conceived immediately after. The early and unplanned pregnancies led to undernourished mothers giving birth to malnourished children, with poor or no medical help or vaccination coverage, either for themselves or the new born babies, perpetuating intergenerational transmission of poverty and ill-health. This not only had an adverse impact on their sexual and reproductive health but also took a heavy toll on their mental health and well-being. Besides looking after the children they also had to take care of all the household chores. They were also isolated from their families and friends

and excluded from participating in community functions. The story of Aditi cited below is only one among many.

Aditi said, "I was 20 years old and had just started going to college when I was married off during Covid. We are five sisters and I was the eldest one, so I became the target. My family wanted to get rid of their 'burden'. My husband's parents assured me that they would let me continue my education after marriage but this never happened. My in-laws constantly reminded me that my prime responsibility was to bear a son. I became pregnant within 9 months of marriage. It was an unwanted pregnancy and my first born was a girl. She was a premature baby. I had no strength in my body and the baby would cry all the time. However, instead of helping me, or caring for me, my in-laws began taunting and torturing me. My husband also joined them. They made me do all the household chores. I began feeling terribly lonely, would cry often and fell into a deep depression but they said I was pretending….! I tried reaching out to my parents but they said that it was my husband and in-law's responsibility to look after me."

Subjected to various forms of Gender based Violence

The girls/women interviewed during the study reported an increase in gender-based violence during the pandemic. As Bean (2022) points out, while people were confined to their homes, protective and responsive services were discontinued or more difficult to use. Intimate partner violence (IPV) which can take several forms, including physical, verbal, emotional, economic, and sexual abuse saw an increase. This is important because as Covid19 cases began to rise the government put in force, stay-at-home orders leaving victims of domestic violence vulnerable and trapped with their perpetrators (Bean, 2022). Several girls reported being subjected to severe domestic and intimate partner violence because of rushed marriages.

Mental and physical violence

Multiple contingencies enforced by the lockdown pushed girls who had rushed marriages into circumstances of extreme vulnerability. Many girls/women asserted that their physical and mental health was compromised as they had to constantly prioritise their partners' and their in-laws needs before theirs. Overburdened with household chores, repeated unwanted pregnancies and having to bear children soon after marriage –

was the fallout. Only a few could come back to their natal homes, but for many this was not an option.

Parvati (Maharashtra) is 29 years old. She was working in a factory prior to her marriage. She got married at the age of 26. Her engagement took place in March 2020 and marriage in June the same year. Her husband was an alcoholic and his family wanted to hide the fact so the marriage took place in a hurry. According to Parvati, he would drink and hurl terrible abuses at her on a daily basis. He was often physically and sexually abusive as well. He drank himself to death. Parvati does not work now, and has returned to her parent's home. She had dreamt that she would be married to a man who would respect her, but it turned out to be absolutely the opposite. According to her, all her 'armaans' (aspirations) have been crushed.

21-year-old Deepali (West Bengal) says she ran away and got married to her boyfriend because her parents were pressurizing her to have an arranged marriage. For some time, everything went well after marriage. But later her boyfriend's attitude changed. He found faults in everything she did and began harassing her. He told her that he had married her only because she forced him to. Then came a time when there was no conversation between them and he began staying away from home for several nights. Soon, he stopped coming home altogether. She could not share this with her parents because she had married against their wishes. " I curse my fate and cry a lot as the people who gave birth to me are not with me and the man I trusted has deserted me. I do not know what to do with my life" says she.

Sexual Violence

As is obvious from the narratives above, many girls who had rushed marriages faced physical and mental violence. There were many others who were subjected to intimate partner violence. An extreme case is that of Shanti (Rajasthan) who is 16 years old at present.

Shanti got married during Covid in 2021 when she was barely 14 years old. She was a school dropout and used to work as a daily wage worker. As per tradition, once her marriage took place she was sent to her marital home for 3 days. However, despite traditional norms not allowing sexual relations during the first visit, her husband forced her to have sexual relations with

him. When she came back home, she missed her period but did not realize that she was pregnant. It was only when she was 5 months pregnant, that she realized that she had conceived. Her parents and in laws were not aware of her pregnancy. When it became obvious, the in laws denied that the child was their son's. Her mother then helped her to deliver the baby in secret in the fields and they left the new born to die. However, the local police came to know of this incident. When they exerted pressure, her parents agreed that it was Shanti's child. The in laws still categorically denied any knowledge of the child. The child expired after 15 days. The police registered a case against Shanti's family for trying to kill the child. The case is still ongoing. Shanti continues to stay with her parents. She cries most of the time and is scared of what the future holds for her!

Loss of agency and self- esteem

Amita (Maharashtra) 22 years old narrates:

She was married to Ravi in November 2020 during Covid. She was a little younger than 18 years at that time. According to Amita, after marriage, Ravi, her husband, did not speak to her properly and never had any physical relations with her. He would tell her to lock the house before he went out and never allowed her to go out. He threatened her with dire consequences were she to go against his wishes. Amita suspects that Ravi might be having an affair because he often spoke on the phone but would never tell her who he was speaking to. This became a cause of constant bickering, arguments and bitter fights between them. One day, the marital family confiscated all her jewelry and literally pushed her out of the home. " I feel completely isolated, unwanted and useless. I am married and not married. I can't focus on anything." Says Amita.

For many girls rushed marriages led to loss of agency and self-esteem and they returned to their natal families lost and bewildered. Yet, there were others who stood firm and were determined to chalk a better future for themselves. The narrative of Rajni given below demonstrates the point.

Rajni Prajapati lived in a small village in Ajmer district. She was in the Std XII and had a deep passion for football. Despite the many obstacles in her path, Rajni was determined to pursue her education and continue playing football. Rajni was married at the tender age of 9 but her life took an unexpected turn when her family was pressured by her relatives and neighbours to perform her gauna during Covid. But her mother stood by her side and refused to send her away. This unwavering support from her mother was the anchor in Rajni's life. However, one day, Rajni's in-laws insisted that she attend a relative's wedding. Rajni made a tough decision to go to her in-laws' village to attend the wedding. During the trip, Rajni took the opportunity to speak to her husband privately. She explained that she had upcoming exams and shared her dream of continuing her education and football career. At that moment, her husband, agreed to support her. But he soon seemed to forget his promise and turned abusive when Rajni tried to remind him. One evening, her husband forced himself upon her, the violence escalated to the point where Rajni was injured and bleeding.

To her dismay, her mother-in-law defended her son's actions, and even suggested they would arrange for an abortion if necessary. The next day, Rajni made her way to her parents' home, determined never to return to her in-laws' house. Her mother supported her. Despite her in-laws' offer to support her studies and football career, Rajni has remained resolute in her decision to distance herself from them. Rajni's journey is far from over, but she is determined to pursue her dreams and build a brighter future, free from the shadows of her troubled past.

Chhaya was 10 years old when she was married. She is 19 years old, the eldest of 3 sisters and a brother. She is pursuing her Graduation and is the first girl from her village to attend college in Ajmer. She has to travel 15 kilometers to reach Ajmer. She says that initially she was very shy, but coming in contact with MJAS has changed her life, particularly joining the program to play football, has made her extremely confident. There was a lot of pressure from her in-laws to perform her Gauna during Covid. But

she was able to negotiate and delay her Gauna as she has become economically independent after joining the Sakhi Center as its in-charge. Her mother, who was initially vary of her daughter joining the program and a masculine game like football, has a completely different outlook towards bringing up girls now. She wants them Chhaya to continue her education and stand on her feet.

Conclusion

The section provides an insight into the contingencies enforced by the lockdown which pushed girls who had rushed marriages into circumstances of extreme vulnerability. The narratives above speak of the immediate and lifelong consequences girls and women faced: their educational and future employment opportunities were disrupted, rushed marriages also took a toll on their sexual and reproductive health due to early pregnancy and childbirth, robbed of their agency to make decisions about their lives, their mental health and well-being were adversely impacted. Overbearing presence of authoritative family members reinforcing patriarchal norms within the household only added to their woes. The myriad forms of gender-based violence inflicted upon them including physical, mental and sexual violence undermined their sense of self. Forced pregnancies, unwanted physical and sexual touch, emotional trauma caused by pressure of paying dowry or not being able to meet societal expectations were all targeted towards them.

However, the study also highlights how the pandemic enabled a micro-environment where girls/ women could do what was otherwise not possible. Several girlsin Rajasthan for example, who had been married in their childhood at the age of 9 or 10 years, defied conventional norms and succeeded in postponing their Gauna. A few girls in Jaipur and Maharashtra had runaway marriages and got married in the temple. In West Bengal the Covid-19 pandemic intersected with Cyclone Amphan causing a dual disaster which led to increased violence and sexual activity within homes leading girls to opt for choice marriages. The study also documents narratives of girls especially in Maharashtra and Jaipur, who used the pandemic as an opportunity to coerce their parents into letting them marry their 'boyfriends' or 'partners' as they were aware that parents would not be

be able to bear the shame and dishonor that would follow their elopement. These and other narratives demonstrate how girls' exercised their agency during lockdowns and did not let the situation over power them.

Section V: Key Learnings Emerging from the Study

When humanitarian disasters such as pandemics, droughts, floods and war strike, the whole population suffers. But in ways not always immediately apparent, and women and girls seem to be bearing the brunt. Immediate and long-term strategies are required to mitigate the toll of humanitarian crisis especially on women and girls.

Future pandemics as well as other humanitarian crisis are inevitable, and when they arrive, there is a need to avoid past pitfalls and instead transform the lessons learned from the pandemic to better support children, especially girls and young women being pushed into rushed marriages. This section highlights the key learnings emerging from this study which can be drawn to develop prevention/ intervention strategies that serve as warnings, as humanitarian disasters continue to strike at alarming rates. It provides insights into the strategies emerging from the literature review as well as those put forth by the study partners in the various states. Though the interventions were introduced by the organisations as a crisis response but have now grown into new areas of work or been integrated into their ongoing work. These strategies are likely to strengthen preparedness in times of future disasters and humanitarian crisis.

Learning # 1: Addressing Household Poverty

It is recommended that poverty alleviation programmes be strengthened by providing tools, skills and resources needed to overcome the challenges faced. These interventions should be gender-responsive and must create opportunities for income generation for women. To ensure that plans are gender sensitive and inclusive, participation of girls and women should be elicited in developing local solutions and planning to deal with future disasters and crisis situations.

Implementation of schemes that aim to enhance the value of the girl child such as 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' and other state level initiatives with objectives should be strengthened. Civil society organisations (CSOs) should play a key role in generating awareness at the grass root level regarding different social protection and welfare schemes and in improving access of families to such schemes.

Girls' across states pointed out that the main reason for their being pushed

into rushed marriages is the poor economic condition of the family which worsens during a crisis situation. The government should provide financial aid to parents to help them keep girls in school and should also put in place policies and programmes prohibiting early, forced and rushed marriages.

TF (West Bengal) recognized the need for residential livelihood programmes to bring girls out of poverty ridden situations and introduce them to technical skills like nursing during Covid. The selected girls were helped to get employment in hospitals. According to the organization, this was one way to bring them out of the context of poverty and violence during the pandemic. The TS staff opine that Government should 'track' the number of girls completing secondary education, those going in for college education, and those who are ready or want to go for vocational training to earn a livelihood. In particular reference to rural marginalized girls it was suggested that they be groomed in order to prepare them to face interviews confidently like city girls, get jobs and earn their living.

Learning # 2: Need to Prioritise Continuing Education

Cash or in-kind transfers conditional on school attendance have proved to be a promising intervention for keeping girls in school, and thereby delaying marriage. Several states, including Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar and West Bengal. Bihar and West Bengal, had established such programmes prior to the onset of the pandemic. However, there is a need to maintain programmes, and adapt them to crisis situations arising at times of pandemics, cyclones, floods, earthquakes etc. This would ensure that girls continue their education during school closures and return to school when schools reopen.

Distribution of learning materials to girls and ensuring free access to digital technology such as providing free phones, laptops, data-packs to enable uninterrupted learning must be ensured. Self-paced learning materials to ensure girls are able to learn at their convenience should also be provided.

Involvement of girls and women in generating mechanisms to track girls' attendance, requirement for accelerated learning and psychosocial support

post any crisis situation is important. Besides, making school level child protection policies a mandatory requirement and strengthening gender-responsive risk analysis and contingency plans based on learnings gathered from Covid-19 would go a long way in ensuring that girls return to school.

All the organizations visited during field visits reiterated that education is essential for developing girls' agency and empowerment. Girls' agency can be built through Life Skill Education programmes in school which can empower them to hold discussions with parents and friends.

*The staff at **AMIED** expressed that when girls are connected to education, they are able to get married later i.e. after completing their education. Mewat Balika Sangh (Girls' groups set up by AMIED) holds regular meetings, where girls are informed about the benefits of education along with regular gender sensitization training. 'Initiative for Better Tomorrow', an AJWS program implemented in the Mewat region since 2016 has significantly strengthened/ supported the girls. It has helped build girls agency and negotiating skills. Many girls who are a part of the programme have been able to push the age at marriage and have convinced their parents to allow them to continue their education..**

Nishtha members asserted that a major lacunae is the lack of records of missing girls during any disaster or humanitarian crisis. They suggested that every Gram Panchayat keep a record of girl children who are out of school or school dropouts. These records will help track the missing girls during any humanitarian disaster.

Sadbhavna Trust has built leadership qualities in girls primarily through perspective building on gender issues and digital literacy sessions. Buland Iradey, Naye Kaushal, Nayi Raahein and Bekhauf Nazrein are the flagship programmes launched by Sadbhavana Trust. The aim of these programmes is three-fold: to build perspective on women's rights and gender equality, to impart and consolidate digital skills, and to provide

---

Initiative for Better Tomorrow Project (Better Tomorrow) supported by AJWS, is implemented by AMIED in 11 Village of Kishangarhbas Block of Alwar district. The main focus of Better Tomorrow is to stop child marriage and create a positive environment for children's education.

experience in community action. Since 2009, approximately 450 girls have benefitted from the basic and advanced leadership building courses, with graduates effecting change in their own lives as well as those of others around them.

Learning # 3: Strengthening programmes and services

A clear learning emerging from the study is that it is crucial that the needs of girls and women are met appropriately, such that the trauma and stress they face finds a place in the discourse to seek solutions in the times of pandemics as well as other humanitarian crisis.

Towards this, Childline, Police or the local CWCs should be vigilant and be declared as essential services during humanitarian crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted that it is essential that mentors, both adult and peer, be made available for girls. Clues such as non-attendance in online classes must be probed and followed up to protect girls from early/ rushed marriages.

The local administration (Gram panchayats, Municipal Corporation) or village child protection committees/ward child protection committees should conduct a census/count of all the children in their vicinity and jurisdiction, particularly adolescent girls from a protection perspective.

On their part, NGOs in collaboration with local governments should initiate massive public education and awareness campaigns on safety and protection of children. Local governance systems like panchayats and urban governance units, resident welfare associations, etc. should display child helpline numbers and regularly announce them.

*According to **Nishtha**, girls often feel isolated in their marital homes. There should be visible women and girls' groups in the villages to help those girls facing problems. The girls should feel that there is somebody to help them at any time of day or night. The organization also feels that the local Zila Parishad should be made more accountable. The local*

panchayat should create an environment and local level policy to pressurize parents desirous of arranging marriages for their underage girls or forcing their girls' into rushed marriages that doing so would exclude them from availing benefits of government schemes.

MJAS *staff spoke about the need for a Helpline app and more Helpline numbers. They said that there was a need to create awareness regarding these apps and Helplines so that girls are able to use the numbers in case of emergency. Also the Gram Panchayats should be made more responsible for strengthening programmes and services. Women constables should be encouraged to have meetings with girls' groups, in order to reduce their fear of police. This would also help girls to become aware of whom to contact in times of need.*

Learning # 4: Addressing Gender Based violence

In documenting the narratives of girls/ women across locations the study highlights how increased threat of GBV during the pandemic became a nightmare for girls and women. It is therefore critical to break the cycle of violence.

There is a need to address immediate and ongoing risks of GBV exacerbated by Covid-19 by recognizing gender-based violence, child protection, and sexual and reproductive health services and information as essential services. Including social service providers, shelters, and adolescent girl-friendly spaces is also crucial. These need be maintained and adapted during any humanitarian crisis.

Developing and strengthening formal and informal protection systems including through engagement of local women's, girls' and children's rights groups also appears as critical. The involvement of key influencers such as religious, traditional and community leaders should also be sought.

There is also an urgent need to improve women's agency and financial independence; rehabilitation; advocacy and awareness (Mitali. N. et al, 2020).

> **Nishtha's Cheetkaar or Shout-out campaign**
>
> *Nishtha has been successful in controlling many cases of gender based violence especially domestic violence, child marriage and suspected cases of rape and trafficking. The village community is trained to look out / identify suspicious voices and loud yells. In most villages in South Paragnas district there are generally 4 to 5 hamlets. Thus whenever anyone hears a suspicious voice or loud yell, the other community members of the hamlet also start shouting at a high volume which is soon followed by the community members of the other hamlets. Together the shout out campaign takes a fierce form in the entire village. In most of the cases the perpetrator surrenders himself out of shame. This campaign is immensely popular as it has not only controlled many difficult situations but also helped in getting out of court settlements. Many perpetrators have been caught red handed and handed over to the police. Most of them are in jail, only 2 or 3 perpetrators have been granted bail to date.*

Learning # 5: Creating Awareness about humanitarian crisis

The study emphasizes the need to ensure and establish pathways for resilience and empowerment during humanitarian response, particularly for those most affected, and those most marginalized socially, economically and politically.

The need to design regular programs to create awareness about humanitarian crisis and help people to deal with crisis situations is paramount. CSOs and NGOs and various organizations working on the ground should ensure that people are aware of the dangers of any humanitarian crisis and the steps to be taken in such crisis. For instance, in West Bengal, the state government was regularly broadcasting information about the two cyclones.

> *During Covid, **TF** conducted one to one phone calls and google meets. Weekly online meetings were held with girls to resolve their problems. A crisis management team including counselors also supported the girls as well as team members overcome the challenges they were facing. TF*

also runs a Healing programme which has two components- the healing process and academic support. The Youth resource cell programme of TF is a prevention model where young people are divided into groups and meet weekly. Mentors identify signs among 'high risk' girls and take necessary action.

*According to **Nishtha** staff members, the West Bengal government took precautionary measures to combat possible devastation during cyclones Amphan and Yass by shifting residents of low lying and coastal areas of the state to safe shelters. Broadcasts by the state machinery regarding the dangers of the cyclones alerted community members and helped in preparedness during cyclones. Taking a cue from this, during Yass, the organization was able to sensitize the Pradhans and other PRIs to create awareness regarding disaster preparedness as well as keep track of how many girl children were not in the shelters. The PRIs along with ASHA educators were made responsible for compiling data. Once the situation improved a little, it was discovered that 131 girls were missing. With the help of police, all but 2 girls were rescued. Keeping data proved to be an effective strategy.*

***MJAS** initiated the Grassroots Journalism program for rural girls' during Covid -19 as it was felt that girls were extremely isolated and needed accurate and complete information about events taking place around them during this period. The first cohort 2020-21 had 32 girls and the second in 2022-23 had 22 girls. Girls learnt the 5W's of news- When, Where, What, Why and How. They were provided with mobile phones which enabled them to learn to create and access Gmail and Zoom account. These online forums helped the girls linked to the program to create awareness among other girls.*

Learning # 6: Need to create safe spaces for girls

The need to create **'safe spaces'** for girls/young women appears as a key component in enhancing their agency and empowerment. Hence, life skills education, health education, dialogues around sexuality and marriage could take place in such spaces. Besides skills in computing and financial literacy,

need to create 'safe spaces' for girls/young women appears as a key component in enhancing their agency and empowerment. Hence, life skills education, health education, dialogues around sexuality and marriage could take place in such spaces. Besides skills in computing and financial literacy, practical skills and leadership roles, training on new technology, acquiring skills they need to navigate the transition from adolescence to adulthood, expanding their support networks appear as critical (Mathur, 2023).The experiences of all the partners in the study underscore the need to create 'safe spaces' for enhancing agency and empowerment of AGYW being pushed into rushed marriages. These safe spaces could be community level forums which girls can reach out to when faced with difficult situations or demands from families regarding their marriage be it the isolation, trauma or stress they face. The spaces could be used to address the vulnerabilities and violence and discrimination encountered by them. Many girls across study sites also expressed the need for such spaces.

***MJAS** staff assert that, schools should not only be a place for providing education. They should be 'safe spaces' for girls where they are able to express their thoughts and become an arena where they can get out of their familial environment, think for themselves, make decisions and create their own identities. **Sakhi Centres** created by MJAS are safe spaces where adolescent girls groups (AGGs) learn, study, dance, draw, create art and discuss issues of common interest with the help of a Mentor provided by the organisation. The adolescents use the Sakhi centres to share their thoughts, concerns and dreams. The centres aim to involve adolescent girls in regular and non-formal educational programs to create strong networks, friendships and support between themselves. The group of young women leaders meet to discuss common concerns and raise their voice and issues at the family, community, district and state level forums.*

***TF** identified and organised highest risk adolescent girls into **Girls Safety Networks** as their regular weekly clusters could not meet during Covid-19. These 'girls only groups' would meet to share their concerns and get inputs on marriage, relationships, skills, abuse, violence, trafficking, self-harm, sexuality etc. They also deepened their understanding of trauma*

healing and initiated a range of healing skills including mindfulness, therapeutic art and movement. After the pandemic TF continued to strengthen the Girls Safety Network programme. It is now a regular after-school programme for at-risk girls, who meet for educational and emotional support for 3 hours daily. The girls get healing and study support along with fitness and nutrition support.

Learning # 7: Ensuring a sustained dialogue on gender norms

There is a pressing need to broaden the definition and articulation of early/forced and rushed marriages to include issues related to gender, sexuality and the centrality of marriage and gender based violence. It is also important to focus on empowering young people by investing in research and knowledge-building around issues of gender and masculinity, sexuality and marriage. Equally important is the need to critically engage with the deeply entrenched societal norms including those around marriage, as a path to bring about sustainable social change.

It is critical to involve young people as partners in the work towards putting a stop to early/ child/ forced and rushed marriages and to imagine and pursue possibilities beyond marriage, based on their needs and aspirations. This would enable them to fend for themselves in any crisis situation.

Together with ensuring that root causes (e.g., rigid gender roles, control over sexuality, etc.) are understood and addressed in interventions around early/ rushed marriage, there is an urgent need to recognize the shortcomings of existing interventions, and build the capacities of organizations to grapple with them.

The study highlights that it is imperative to invest in the dreams and aspirations of girls and provide them with the support they need in order to create a more equitable and just society. Girls should be allowed to dream big, aspire to pursue careers of their choice, and follow their passions without fear of judgment or discrimination. This would embolden them to cope with any situation that may arise in future disasters and humainatarian crisis, especially those within their own homes.

Conclusion

This study highlights that Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns have had a devastating effect on communities and economies throughout the world. It resulted in extreme poverty and economic crises especially for those belonging to the most vulnerable castes and class groups in all the four states covered by the study. The existing gender disparities within families and communities were heightened to further girls' and women's susceptibilities. However, the study also points out that while economic crisis appears as a root cause for rushed marriages, several other factors pushed families to conduct rushed marriages. It explores the regional variations in the nature of rushed marriages, along with inter and intra state cultural differences.

The narratives of girls/women during field visits provide an insight into the contingencies enforced by the lockdown which pushed girls who had rushed marriages into circumstances of extreme vulnerability. They speak of the immediate and lifelong consequences girls and women faced: their educational and future employment opportunities were disrupted, rushed marriages also took a toll on their sexual and reproductive health due to early pregnancy and childbirth, robbed of their agency to make decisions about their lives, their mental health and well-being were adversely impacted. Overbearing presence of authoritative family members reinforcing patriarchal norms within the household only added to their woes. The myriad forms of gender-based violence inflicted upon them including physical, mental and sexual violence undermined their sense of self. Forced pregnancies, unwanted physical and sexual touch, emotional trauma caused by pressure of paying dowry or not being able to meet societal expectations were all targeted towards them.

However, the study also highlights how the pandemic enabled a micro-environment where girls/ women could do what was otherwise not possible. Several girls defied conventional norms and succeeded in postponing their Gauna. A few girls had runaway marriages and got married in the temple. Increased violence and sexual activity within homes also lead girls to opt for choice marriages. These and other narratives demonstrate how girls'

exercised their agency during lockdowns and did not let the situation over power them.

Since humanitarian crisis and man made disasters are inevitable, and as the number and nature of such crisis is on an increase there is a need to avoid past pitfalls and transform the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic. The study puts forth key learnings which can be drawn to develop prevention/ intervention strategies that serve as warnings during any humanitarian disaster.

It is pertinent that the findings of this study be seen in the light of structural 'resilience building', in particular, to protect and build resilience so that the lives of AGYW are not adversely impacted during any humanitarian crisis.

Select References

- Action Aid International, (2020), Covid-19 lockdown and school closures force girls into early marriage (https://actionaid.org/stories/2020/Covid-19-lockdown-and-school-closures-force-girls-early-marriage).
- Anjerrika R. Bean (2021) 'Surviving Covid19 (Increased Domestic Violence, Marginalized Communities, and Innovative Solutions)' Journal of family Strengths, Volume 20...
- Arya, D. (2020), 'India's coronavirus lockdown has had an adverse impact on children, pushing up incidents of child marriage and child labour', BBC News.
- BBC News,(2020), India's Covid crisis sees rise in child marriage and trafficking, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54186709, September 18
- Child Relief and You (CRY) Policy Brief, (2020), "Policy Brief -Combating Child Marriage during Covid and Beyond", October 2020; New Delhi
- Chauhan, A. Times of India (2021), West UP districts fare worst as UP reports 354 child marriage cases amid pandemic http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/ articleshow/ 83376997.cms? utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst
- Girls Not Brides, (2021) Covid-19 and Child Marriage: A Year Onhttps:// www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1546/Covid-19 and child marriage_ July_2021. pdf
- Girls not Brides Rajasthan (2020), Covid-19 Response, Impact of Girls: Making Their Voices Heard
- Jeejebhoy, S. (2021) 'Child Marriages during the Pandemic', India Forum. https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/child-marriages-during-pandemic
- Khanna, A. and Kang, A. (2018), Searching for the Boys: A Review of Literature, Analyses and Practices Relating to Early and Child Marriages, With a Focus on Boys, Men and Masculinity, American Jewish Women's Society
- Khanna M and Kochhar N. (2020,) Do Marriage Markets Respond to a Natural Disaster? The Impact of Flooding of River Kosi in India, July 06 http://dx.doi. org/10.2139/ssrn.3644052

- Marques, E. S., de Moraes, C. L., Hasselmann, M. H., Deslandes, S. F., & Reichenheim, M. E. (2020). Violence against women, children, and adolescents during the Covid-19 pandemic: overview, contributing factors, and mitigating measures. Cadernos de Saude Publica, 36 (4).
- Mitali N, Manvika G, Sonakshi C, Jyothi M, and Malhotra G, (2020) With Covid-19, comes the "Shadow Pandemic": How the surge of domestic violence gripped India's women in 2020, Times of India, November 24.
- Nitnaware (2023) Covid-19, Poverty may have spurred child-marriages in india: Activists, Down To Earth, February 20.
- National Crimes Records Bureau (2020), Data: Number of Child Marriages Increased by 50% in 2020; Experts Say More Reporting May Be Factor, https://www.news 18.com/news/india/50-percent-rise-child-marriage-cases-2020-experts-more-reporting-factor-4218695.html.
- Rajagopal,S. Mathur K and Vasudha, C, 'Visibalising Sites of Gender Inequalities in Secondary Education Covid-19 and Beyond, Institute of Development Studies, IDSJ Working paper No. 181
- Sadbhavana Trust, (2021), Todi Bandishen: Covid-19 Mein Shaadien, Breaking Barriers: Marriages during Covid- 19 Pandemic. A qualitative look into the effects of the premature marriages held during the Covid-19 pandemic on young Women's lives, Sadbhavna Trust, UP.
- Sarkar, S. (2020) Covid-19 has triggered anuptickin child marriages in India. The Week magazine, July 17.
- Save the Children, (2020), Africa Version, 2020 - The Global Girlhood Report
- Sharma, R. (2022).5 key reasons why Covid-19 has led to a rise in child marriage https://www.includovate.com/5-key-reasons-why-Covid-19-has-led-to-a-rise-in-child-marriage/
- The News Indian Express Online (2020) Lockdown: Over 500 cases of child marriages reported since mid-March in West Bengal, June 30 https://www. newindianexpress. com/nation/2020/Jun/29/lockdown-over-500-cases-of-child-marriages-reported-since-mid-march-in-west-bengal-2163008.html
- Times of India (2020), Government intervened to stop over 5,584 child marriage during corona virus-induced lockdown, July 07, Corona virus induced lockdown/ articles how/76661071.cms)

- The Global Slavery Index, Spotlight 2021, https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/findings/spotlights/understanding-forced-and-child-marriage/
- The Hindu (2020). Gone girls of rural Maharashtra, (https://www.thehindu business line.com/blink/know/gone-girls-of-rural-maharashtra/article 32454255. ece)
- UNWomen (2020), Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic
- UNFPA (2020), https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/ Responding _to_Covid-19_Pivoting_the_GPECM_to_the_pandemic.pdf
- United Nations Foundations (2020) Michelle M and Anderson A, The Shadow Pandemic: How the Covid-19 Crisis is Exacerbating Gender Inequality, April 14
- UNICEF Press Release (2021) (https://www.unicef.org/eap/press-releases/10-million-additional-girls-risk-child-marriage-due-Covid-19-unicef).UNICEF
- UNICEF Press Release (2021), March 7, New York
- UNICEF, (2021), Covid-19: A Threat to Progress Against Child Marriage, New York
- Yukich, J et.al. (2021), 'Projecting the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Child Marriage', Journal of Adolescent Health 69, S-23-S30