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## The trinity of patriarchy, poverty and the pandemic

By [Namita Bhandare](#) 

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There is a clear link between keeping girls in school and delaying marriage. Raising the minimum age of marriage for girls to 21 is not a solution

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Growing up in a village in Rajasthan's Ajmer district, Kamini (not her real name) dreamed of joining the police. But the daughter of a daily wage labourer had to drop out after completing the eighth grade — the high school was too far away and, moreover, she had to do the household chores.

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Growing up in a village in Rajasthan's Ajmer district, Kamini (not her real name) dreamed of joining the police. But the daughter of a daily-wage labourer had to drop out after completing Class 8 — the high school was too far away and, moreover, she had to do the household chores.

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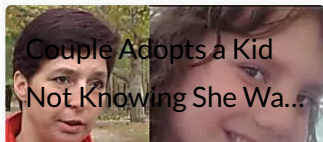
An intervention by Educate Girls, a non-governmental organisation, led her to rejoin school, eventually reaching the 12th grade. Then the pandemic hit. Schools were shut, exams postponed and links with the outside world snapped.

When the dust had cleared, Naresh, a social worker who uses one name, took a headcount. Three girls, including the 17-year-old Kamini, had gone missing. Like many girls in their village, they had been married off as children. But custom dictated that their gauna — when they would join their matrimonial homes — would take place years later. Now, they had been abruptly dispatched.

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## PROMOTED



An unholy trinity of the pandemic, poverty and patriarchy has led to a surge in child marriage, say activists.

India is home to the world's largest number of child brides with 1.5 billion girls below 18 being married, according to Unicef. Until the pandemic hit, we had been making progress. Thanks largely to rising school enrolment of girls, under-18 marriages had come down from 47% in 2005-06 to 27% in 2015-16. There is a link between keeping girls in school and delaying marriage. "When a girl is sitting at home, the whole village says 'get her married,'" one girl in her first year of college told me.

We are in danger of losing this gain due to the pandemic. As this newspaper reported, 16% of students, girls and boys, in Delhi government and municipal schools have fallen off the grid as a result of education moving online. One can only speculate on how many will eventually return to school, and whether some have already joined the labour force or been married off.

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Given the unusual disruption, a government proposal to raise the minimum age of marriage for women to 21 is mistimed and misplaced. The priority is not to tinker with a globally acceptable age for marriage and the age of adulthood for most matters, including voting, in this country but to figure out how to keep girls in school.

If the issue is removing gender discrimination, then reduce the minimum age of marriage for men to 18.

Raising the age from 18 to 21 for women, fears lawyer Madhu Mehra, will extend parental control in a country where "love" marriages are frowned upon. "A high number of elopement cases are prosecuted by families. If you increase the age, our courts will be clogged and the harm to young people will be enormous," she warns.

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Child and adolescent marriage is a consequence of girls dropping out of school, not a cause. To delay marriage is to get girls to remain in school. Enable dreams and aspirations, and the problem of child marriage will take care of itself.

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***Namita Bhandare writes on gender***

***The views expressed are personal***

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Namita Bhandare

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Namita Bhandare writes on gender and other social issues and has 25 years of experience in journalism. She has edited books and features in a documentary on sexual violence. She tweets as @namitabhandare