

A photograph of a woman in a red sari carrying a white pot on her head, walking up a stone staircase. The background is a wall made of large, irregular brown stones.

Dr Bushra Beegom Rk

**Women and Girls
in
Difficult Situations : Towards
A Gendered Policy**

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Shifting Numbers Of Marriage During Covid 19 Lockdown A Study Conducted among the Parents of Under Graduate Girl Students of Malabar

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The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China has swept the entire year of 2020 and has resulted in an ongoing pandemic. Life in the face of the pandemic has become the new normal. It has influenced the lives of people starting from their very basic to all the advanced entities. In the light of such a social change, we have driven our focus to an inquisitive endeavour in order to understand about the social phenomenon of marriage. The paper will be a study based on our hypothesis that owing to the COVID-19

pandemic and certain socio-political economic factors in the society, there has been a notable surge in the rate of marriages among the girls, pursuing their under-graduation programmes. The paper will revolve around two of the objectives which seeks to analyse the social and economic political factors contributing to the fluctuations in the rate of marriages among undergraduate girl students associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic. We will attempt to bring out the connection between the objective of the study and the theory of biopolitics by Michel Foucault. The methodology involving mainly the quantitative method of data collection like the sample survey method will be carried out for the study. The area of the study will be concentrated around the students of colleges in the Malabar region of Kerala. The primary data will be collected by the questionnaire method. Articles, newspapers, websites etc will serve as the secondary data.

Keywords: Pandemic, Lockdown, COVID-19, Marriage, Undergraduate, Biopolitics

Introduction

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China is what the entire year of 2020 has been about. The disease from its onset has spread to various countries and has become a worldwide phenomenon with many cases being reported worldwide and has resulted in an ongoing pandemic. This was an unexpected challenge in the face of the entire world and has tampered with the lives of billions of population. It has influenced the lives of people starting from their very basic to all the advanced entities. This unexpected strike has proved to be first of its kind and has affected each and every section of the society. Several countries were seen undertaking preparedness and response to this new predicament of COVID-19. Governments enforced strict lockdown measures, social distancing rules, extensive testing, and closing borders nationally and internationally etc. Threats and challenges seemed more strenuous to large nations with large populations like India. India with its approximately 1.3 billion population, spread among diverse states, stretching economic and social disparities distinct cultural values, health inequalities etc present unique challenges. Preparedness and dealing measures varied at state level. Governments all over the world were praised and also criticised for the particular ways they chose to

handle the situation. Whether the measures were successful or unsuccessful always remained a point of contention between the masses. Overall the situation proved to be threatening to people all over the world, with daily counts of mortality and cases surging. People were locked in their homes, in various countries, entire systems including education, trade, economy etc facing a dead-end. The government's sudden response and enforcement of lockdown has immediate disadvantages to the already vulnerable populations like daily wage earners, migrant workers and raised the concern for poverty and starvation among people who work in the informal economy. Basically the situation was an unexpected slap to the masses and it forced the people to view the world and foresee the events and plan for things differently than they would have ever imagined. The situation disrupted every element and had become a concern to the events that were in stock and was about to happen in the meanwhile. The impending events for several sections of the society was also a major concern like the state elections, conducting of significant examinations, sports events, international programmes and summits among many others. Several functions were disrupted out of the blue. Interestingly, little is known about how COVID-19, and the resulting governmental and social responses, may influence union formation, particularly marriage.

Weddings have taken a turn on this COVID period with marriages and functions declining in certain part of the world and increasing in certain places. Factors like social distancing and the pandemic situation and challenges have encouraged people to call it off and other socio-political and economic reasons might have led to the increase in the rate of marriages. Marriages and its different elements like age, sex, economic, social background and many more vary according to different societies, religions, localities etc. The significance of marriage careened from period to period. Covid can be termed as a significant period due to the changes it have brought and although it might not have given different meaning to it wouldn't be wrong to say that it has shown some fluctuations in the rate and trend of marriages, for instance Webinar and online marriages have paved the way. Undoubtedly in the society, when a disaster strikes, women are the first sections in the vulnerable position. Undergraduate marriage among girls, defined as the marriages of girls pursuing their undergraduate studies varying from the contemporary legal marriage age of approx (18-25), who are in the midst

of their studies programmes of enlightenment and education who have not yet entered the labour force and have not yielded as productive to the economy. Marriage even though with its important functions such as sexual gratification and regulation, division of labour between the sexes, economic protection and consumption, and satisfaction of personal needs for affection, status, and companionship may sometimes be of disadvantage especially to members who are in their stages of formations, moulding, training on their way to cater to the self and the society.

Therein, the focus of this study would be to analyse the connection between the rate of marriage among undergraduate girl students and the COVID-19 backdrop. An area of study formed due to recent situations which has not been done before. The situation includes the social background of a pandemic and a political backdrop of an anticipatory bill concerning marriage age. Since there has been a presumption of increased rate of marriages among undergraduate girls during COVID period, in our paper we have set out to analyse the socio-political factors that have led to the fluctuations in the rate of marriages in the girls pursuing their undergraduate studies in the colleges of Malabar region. The paper also endeavours to connect to Michel Foucault's theory of Biopolitics.

Relevance of the study

The recent emergence of the COVID pandemic situation have paved the way to a lot of changes in the lives of people, socially, politically and economically. This has given way to a large scope of studies and observation. It has affected a massive section of the society and the way of their life. However during these situations Government has introduced laws, bills and proposal with or without relation to COVID such as the new farm laws, love jihad law and specifically the proposal regarding the marriage age. These circumstances has given way to our inquisitive observation in rate of marriages and its fluctuations, of girls around us undergoing their degree studies, particularly in the Malabar region. Therefore to find the reasonable end of our observation and to analyse different factors that gave way to this phenomenon this study seemed to be important. Henceforth, our study is relevant in this context. The major objectives of the study are to analyse the socio economic political factors

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contributing to the change in the rate of marriages of the undergraduate girl students during COVID-19 pandemic. The hypothesis is owing to the recent COVID-19 pandemic situation and several socio-political factors in the society, there has been a notable increase in the rate of marriages among the girls, pursuing their under-graduation programmes.

Research could only focus on a maximum number of only 30 samples for the study owing to the Pandemic situation which may not be adequate to generalise the result. The limited availability of resources on this newly formed area and topic was a challenge. Getting honest and genuine answers from the respondents via online forms proved to be a predicament. Most of them were reluctant to answer the open ended questions. These are the major limitations noticed related this study.

Methodology

Data collection process and the analysis has been carried out strictly by sticking on to the objectives of the study. This study adopted quantitative methods for the data collection purpose. The data collection was based on the sample-survey method. For the systematic collection of data to be quantitatively evaluated, the questionnaire tool was used for primary data collection combining the probing method along with this tool to ensure best possible data with maximum accuracy. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions in which eight questions were close ended and eight questions were open ended. The data were collected indirectly by researchers from the respondents via online forms limited by the persisting Pandemic situation. Telephonic interview was also used to get more clarity on the same data. Articles, newspapers, websites etc served as the secondary data.

Our study is concerning the change in the rate of marriages of the undergraduate girl students from during COVID period, where the study was conducted among the parents of the subjects. The data collection was mainly focused on the students pursuing their undergraduate programmes in the Colleges of Malabar region and the participants of the study were their respective parents. Three main colleges were focused for the study namely Farook College in Kozhikode district, PSMO College in Tirurangadi of Malappuram district and Sir Syed College in Kannur district. Owing to the Pandemic situation and the lack of time, only 30 samples in total, i.e 10 girls undergoing their undergraduate

studies in each of these colleges were taken and the data collection was split among their parents with male and female parents equally participating in the process. In the sample selection procedure also active participation is ensured from the part of researchers to ensure authenticity and credibility in focusing as well as selecting samples for the study.

Social Factors and Analysis

The COVID-19 Pandemic undoubtedly caused an upheaval in the lives of people. It changed a lot of elements in the lives of people. People responded to it in different ways, resulting governmental and social varied, it even influenced union formation, particularly marriage. The COVID-19 had set up an atmosphere of fear, panic, confusion and it was followed by norms of Social distancing, limitations to gatherings, quarantining, isolations etc. Marriage above being the union between two individuals is also a moment of public social ritual, tying together two (or more) families into a new kinship network. In the atmosphere of this pandemic, people were limited to their own homes and limited from venturing into the outside world. Educational institutions were shut down and Education took the form of a new Avatar and were accessible in a touch. Online classes became the norm. Work at home became the norm. People could access their study or work through their screens. Role conflicts felt all the more relevant in this situation. In the situation of such a pandemic, there has been a notable surge in the rate of marriages among the girls, pursuing their under-graduation programmes.

• Stuck at home

The pandemic forced educational institutions to shut down and students were stuck at home for longer than ever. This created to an atmosphere where role conflict was a real challenge than ever. A girl student had to be a daughter, granddaughter, sister, neighbour and a student at the same time. Being a student she couldn't get away from the responsibilities and realities of being at home the same time too. This proved to be challenge for most of the people, including working people. Apart from all these challenges she also started getting in the sight of the society very much more constantly. Her own family, neighbours, relatives and family would see her more now. She eventually starts becoming topic

220 | Women and Girls in Difficult Situations : Towards A Gendered Policy of conversation and judgements. The patriarchy starts dictating her coming of age of marriage .Even her own parents and women in her family is unknowingly a victim of these norms that are fed by the availing patriarchy in society.

- **Patriarchal surveillance**

Weddings are which we are socialized into believing as the most important event in our life. The problem is the patriarchal norms that this attitude toward marriage perpetuates in the Indian society. If you are a girl and you have big plans ahead of you to pursue to higher education, masters and a career, the first counter you will have to face from these relatives will be how it takes a lot of time and how waiting that long to get married might not be good for you. They come with the reasoning that all good proposals or boys will be gone by then. So, now the logic is that you either compromise on your ambitions, or you lose out on a 'good proposal. 'What a good proposal entails is yet to be defined. You can see how the women's bodies fall under the patriarchal surveillance. They want the girl to look like how a marriage prospect or a groom and their family will like her. So once they are in the good book category of the male gaze, the higher the demand in the marriage market. So as opposed to the girl being away at college most of the time and being home 24x7 she is falling into the male gaze phenomenon by the society more and more.

- **Financial concern**

Financial situation is another factor. There is a majority consensus thought that as the girl ages, the financial liability on her marriage increases. These might include the expenses of the wedding, dowries, gifts etc. Most of the parents wouldn't want to give away their long looked after daughter without offering anything to her and most of them engage in dowry and gifting the groom side which is a problem on its own. Several banks, financial institution and even the Government has encouraged schemes like "*dahej*" basically dowry schemes for their daughters marriage, reinforcing the outlook that girls are a burden rather than assets.

- **Pandemic situation**

The COVID-19 Pandemic situation is seemed to have had both impressions of convenience and inconvenience for the parents. Firstly, it is convenient considering the cut down in guests as per the COVID-19 rules and hence the cut down in expenses. Covid-19 has cast its shadow on everything and jeopardised big events. Plans to tie knots have got tangled up hopelessly as the pandemic shows no signs of abating, so weddings are simpler with the scale of celebrations downsized drastically. Fortunately, they are lighter on the pocket of the host too. They can cut down unnecessary expenses and avoid the burden of extravagant weddings. Some weddings were even conducted online when the groom or the bride were in inaccessible locations. All those who doesn't get to attend the wedding get updates on social media too. It is a blessing in disguise for the financially struggling ones since its less expense and a curse for the rich in terms of them being deprived of flaunting their riches and grandeur.

- **Conformity**

Conformity is a type of social influence involving a change in belief or behaviour in order to fit in with a group. As others girls of or more or less around your daughter's age are getting married, there grows an unknown pressure inside their minds too to grow concern over their daughter's marriage. Especially in this COVID period they also starts noticing the trend and the convenience of conducting a marriage as opposed to the pre-pandemic times.

- **Ample time**

The COVID-19 pandemic created an atmosphere of ample time. Time, the most precious and valuable things was considered to be handy around in this pandemic situation. People were equipped with a lot of free time but were trapped with a lot of limitations. Basically they had a lot of free time and nothing much to do. A viable option in these times were seen as marriage for parents, as well as the prospects involved in marriage who were more or less ready to step out of the state of being single.

- **Decent proposals**

A majority response achieved was the outlook that one couldn't simply

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say “no” to good decent proposals .For parents, marriage for their kids, above all means security .Especially for a parent of a daughter in the Indian society, marriage is sanctity and safety to their daughters. It is a form personal, financial and social security. They fear the safety of their unmarried daughters, they fear illicit relationships, intercaste affairs etc. So when a good viable prospect or marriage alliance proposal comes in their way, they don't think much. They agree to it conditionally or unconditionally. Undergraduate level of study is considered a standard level of Education in most of these families, they might or might not complete or pursue higher levels of Educations and careers later.

- **Religion**

Then there are religions which might bring in influence. Certain religious customs or practices in following might influence the parents to get their daughters married. Getting your children married as early as possible is encourages in certain religions with conditions applied. In the Malabar regions mostly the Muslim community accounting to early marriages.

- **Family situations**

There are also situations where Covid doesn't play part ,especially certain Family situations and backgrounds, wherein getting their children around a particular age is a tradition in their family ,Certain family sentiments coming into play like anxiety of the Senior citizens or grandparents turning older ,Only daughter ,Oldest daughter, Other grown up daughters in line etc.

Table Analysis: Sex and opinion

In our Study, Researchers collected a total of 30 samples and analysed their parent's responses via the use of questionnaires. Several questions were asked to get a systematic knowledge on getting to know the social factors contributing to the fluctuations in the rate of marriages among undergraduate girl students associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic. Based on the responses, the factors were more or less evaluated.

a) The following table shows the response regarding the concern or anxiety over their unmarried daughters who has surpassed the age of 18.

Parents anxious about unmarried daughters			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	40%	60%	
Father	70%	30%	

b) The following table analyses the responses of parents regarding the financial liabilities due to increasing age of daughters.

Financial liabilities and daughters age are directly proportional			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	60%	40%	
Father	50%	50%	

c) The following table shows the response regarding the increased concern over their daughter's marriage in COVID-19 times.

Parents have given more thinking to their daughter's marriage during the pandemic			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	70%	30%	
Father	70%	30%	

d) The following table shows the responses regarding pressure from within their respective religion regarding the marriage age of the daughters

religious pressure on daughter's marriage			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	70%	30%	
Father	90%	10%	

e) The following table shows the responses regarding the conforming pressure related to other same or similar age marriage influence

Pressure from Similar age marriages happening around			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	80%	20%	
Father	90%	10%	

f) The following table shows the responses regarding parents offering of dowry, gifts or other forms of assets.

Gifted dowries, gifts or other assets			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	50%	50%	
Father	80%	20%	

g) The following table shows the response regarding the parents giving prominence to their daughter's wishes, opinions and interest on her marriage.

Given prominence to daughter's wishes and opinions			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	100%	0%	
Father	100%	0%	

h) The following table shows the response regarding the society, natives, family relatives etc getting a say in their daughter's marriage

relatives, natives and family getting a say in the matter			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	80%	20%	
Father	60%	40%	

i) The following table shows the response regarding the convenience of conducting the marriage during COVID times.

Marriages during COVID-19 more convenient			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	100%	0%	
Father	80%	20%	

Political factors and Analysis

India, like all other nations is facing one of the worst crisis in the nation's history with the emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the economy of the nation taking a dive down deep hill. There are things that has to be done desperately by the government to fix these. However during these situations Government has introduced several other laws, bills and proposal with or without relation to Covid such as the new farm laws, love jihad law and specifically the proposal regarding the marriage age.

With the government setting up a task force, 'age at marriage' for girls and women has once again become a matter of national concern. Age at marriage has been a matter of debate in India for over 140 years now. The age limits have gone under changes a several times and the last changes were made as the Prohibition of Child marriage Act in 2006 with the ages of 18 and 21 set as limits for girls and boys respectively. The proposal that is now on the table from the current government is to raise the age of women entering marriage to 21 years. The prime minister has mentioned this among his priorities for the year during his Independence Day address to the nation.

The main arguments in favour of revising the age of marriage beyond the existing marriage age of 18 years for girls are around gender equality and around health and demographic benefits. Although, the gender equality aspect can be looked after by reducing the age of marriage for boys as well but that doesn't interest the Government. The health benefit is mentioned as girls who have teenage pregnancies are at higher risk compared to those who are over 20 but the risks are higher at age 15 or 16 and the difference in risk between say age 19 and 22 years is at the most marginal. According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS)

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 conducted during 2015-16, about a quarter of all married women in the age-group of 20-24 years had been married before 18 years of age. This was a considerable improvement from the situation ten years ago, where nearly half of all married women of the same age group were married before 18 years for the time of the previous round of the NFHS. Undoubtedly, there is an increase in the age of marriage of girls and in most marriages across the country today, the bride is over 18 years of age. What benefit then would be achieved by legally deferring the age at marriage of women?

However this proposal even though have not come in to effect has drawn many parents anxious and concerned about it coming into force. Many prospects whose marriages were already engaged or agreed on who were under the age of 21 would be in trouble if it comes true. It might disrupt many parents planning regarding their daughters marriage etc. Also in communities where they marry children as soon as possible after they turn 18 they will have to wait three more years. When people kept giving license to children attributing to 18 as adulthood and that they could take independent decisions after 18 will to wait for three more years. Therefore to analyse the political factor that plays as the anticipatory law proposal here, we asked several questions and gained responses from the parents of the students regarding the political factors.

Tables- views and opinion

a) The following table shows the response regarding the parent's awareness regarding the Governments revised age for marriage law proposal

Aware of Govt's revised marriage age proposal			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	90%	10%	
Father	90%	10%	

b) The following table shows the responses regarding the parents support of the Government's proposal for revised age of marriage

Support the Govt's revised marriage age proposal			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	70%	30%	
Father	60%	40%	

c) The following table shows the responses regarding the parents concern over the proposal coming into effect

concern on proposal coming into force			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	50%	50%	
Father	70%	30%	

d) The following table shows the responses regarding the parents opinion on agreement with the supremacy of the state over the marriage of individuals?

Agree to the Governments supremacy over individual rights			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	40%	60%	
Father	60%	40%	

e) The following response shows the response regarding the parents support on the uniform civil code in marriage laws

Support uniform civil code in marriage laws			
Sex	Yes	No	
Mother	70%	30%	
Father	60%	40%	

Marriage and 'Biopolitics'

'Biopolitics' is an intersectional field between human biology and politics. It is a political wisdom taking into consideration the administration of life and a locality's populations as its subject. To quote

Michel Foucault, it is “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order” (Foucault 1977, pp. 223-238).

Marriage constitutes a surprisingly dense site in contemporary cultural logics. The fantasies about romance, commitment and relationships, proliferating across a range of media contexts, often obscure the way that marriage is used politically to discipline and administrate the population. Foucault sought to demonstrate the political shifts that occurred around the early 1800s which asserted power over life itself. Biopower—the power over life—was enabled through two intertwined functions. The first, which he called biopolitical, focused on the administration of the life of the population, seeking to strengthen and enhance it through techniques as wide-ranging as labour laws, public hygiene, and the regulation of heredity. The second, called anatomopolitical, focused on the disciplining of individuals, primarily through knowledge and institutions from medicine and psychiatry to principles of taxation. This discipline was peculiarly effective partly because it deployed the notion of power as oppressing natural desires to produce those desires as the individual’s own, and liberation as the expression of those desires (Foucault 1977, pp. 223-238).

We know in an Indian society the idea of family and reproduction out of wedlock is a taboo. Living together and premarital affairs, same sex marriages etc are very scarce, exceptional and were illegal up until recently. This proves how marriage is used politically to discipline the community, control population, enhance certain desirable certain sections of the society while controlling certain undesired sections, same sex marriages for instance. Such an administration is subjugating bodies, controlling the natural desires and drives of people for the fulfilment of their vision. The anticipatory law which seeks to increase the age of marriage to 21 for girls can be seen as such a technique. It frames that upon the enactment of the law, girls can only get married at 21 which pushes the age of being in a legally and socially approved dyad further where an average Indian girl can only engage in all forms of relations after marriage later than what is possible now. This has also come with certain views that it targets the Muslim community, one of the fastest flourishing religious community in India, with a fast population growth rate. Such a political discourse might have lead the people to act accordingly leading to them anticipating the enactment of the law and getting girls married as soon as possible.

Conclusion

The study has been an endeavour to understand the socio economic and political reasons that contributed to the change in the rate of marriages among undergraduates girl students during COVID-19 Pandemic. This study based on our hypothesis that there has been tremendous change in the rate of marriages among undergraduate girl students during COVID-19 pandemic period proved to be true with our data. This study has stated a positive correlation between the rate of marriage of undergraduate girls and Covid lockdown period. The study shows us how the pandemic situation has favoured in the change in the rate of marriage and how it has brought a change in almost every spheres including social and political. The study has also resulted in establishing a connection between Michel Foucault's theory of "biopolitics". The style of government that regulates population through "biopower" is very important to observe in the political factors steering the rate of marriage of undergraduate girls. The application and impact of political power on all aspects of human power is discussed in Foucauldian concept of "biopolitics". For Foucault, "biopower" is a technology of power for managing humans in large groups; the distinctive quality of this political technology is that it allows for the control of entire population. It primarily address the relationship between power and knowledge and how they are used as a form of social control through societal institutions (Foucault 1977, pp. 223-238). In this study marriage is identified as the social institution and the new legal age of marriage is used as a form of social control.

The Study has gone with inquisitive depth into the social and political factors distinctively. Although it has also bought in brief contradicting studies and also that the reasons for marriages during COVID was not just limited to the particular period rather other reasons. Although we have brought up the topic of undergraduate girls and their marriage was just for the specificity of our topic as this is a perfectly legal age of marriage. People who marry in their degree years has also yielded productive to the workforce and society and has soared several heights. The study is also open to the perceptions of the readers. The readers are free to analyse the data and the factors and relate to it. The study witnessing the emergence of a new social discourse during Covid lockdown in the area of marriage as a relevant social institution.

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Discourse refers to ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them. (Foucault 1977, pp 223-238)

The study has helped to understand things in a new dimension in the light of a Pandemic. How humans beings adapt to literally every situation and cope up with it to survive and move on. It shed light onto certain new advancements like online education platforms, online marriages etc. The Pandemic therefore might have been a lesson to many, if not everyone that to not forget the essence of existence, help to realize the importance of whatever we had including blessings like relationship, wealth, time, freedom, security etc. It has taught to take a break from our pace of life, and realise our true purpose and journey. It provided insights on the needs and purposes not just of individuals, but of societies and of the natural world, in pursuit of not just our individual, self-interested payoffs, but in pursuit of all our overarching communitarian goals that are articulated in our religious and cultural aspirations. That we can live with the simplest means and from strength within.

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