

ADVERSE IMPLICATIONS OF TEENAGE MARRIAGE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE ESTATE SECTOR OF SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The work of caring involves intimacy, personal commitments, emotional attachments and moral obligations than all other forms of work. As a result, the work of caring takes on peculiar forms when it negotiates with certain sociocultural deliberations, which go beyond economic measures. The current study, which resonates with Nancy Folbre's concept of the "Care Penalty," contends that teenage marriage results in a care penalty that deprives girls of their fundamental rights while also creating an early learning deficiency among children in their early lives. Not all parents can support their children because of sociocultural and economic barriers; as a result, not all children are getting the opportunity to learn the same way up to the required standards compared to their peers, despite the widespread belief that parental support and facilitation are essential for learning during the early childhood years. Drawing data from a constructivist grounded theory study coupled with an embedded-single case design adopted in the selected estate communities of Sri Lanka, the study strived to understand how teenage marriage increases learning deficits in young children and how parents are hindered from assisting their children in their early childhood. The participants of this study included twelve mothers with children aged three to eight, six midwives, five teachers in early childhood development centres, three Plantation Management officers and two Hindu priests. All participants were recruited purposively. Data collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations were analysed thematically. Early childhood education is in jeopardy in the estate communities examined as a result of decreased parental support due to issues stemming from the conflict between the care burden and meeting the needs of the adolescent habitus. Teenage marriage prevented child mothers from having age-appropriate experiences and exposed them to age-inappropriate ones. This led to a loss of capabilities, which resulted in economic disempowerment. Lack of expertise in early childhood care and education prevents parents from providing proper care and education for their children. Furthermore, young children of these families tend to babysit, which negatively impacts caregiving and care-receiving toddlers. When children's surroundings do not encourage them to participate consistently in learning activities, they are more likely to fall short of meeting needed learning standards. Overall, the study suggests that teenage marriage, as an integrated cultural phenomenon of the estate communities studied for this study, discourages early childhood education because of the care penalty peculiarly developed within estate culture.

Keywords: Care penalty, Child mothers, Early childhood education, Learning deficiency, Teenage marriage

INTRODUCTION

The work of caring involves intimacy, personal commitments, emotional attachments and moral obligations than all other forms of work. Even though often neglected in the public discourse, the work of care for others – whether paid or unpaid – contributes to defining the role of women in particular (Folbre, 2002). Women often involve care work as a moral responsibility and as a duty to the family without direct income benefits. However, the economic benefit of care work has tremendous benefits for the family. The contemporary industrial world has captured the importance of care work, and outsourcing it generates wide-performing professions.

However, beyond economic measures, the work of caring takes peculiar forms when it negotiates with certain sociocultural deliberations. As Folbre (2006, 2018) described, the care penalty prevents women from realizing their life-goals and specializing in care work has been costly as it reduces individual and collective bargaining power. Folbre conceptualized the concept of care work solely on economic deliberations, but the present study suggests that the work of care by women can even be considered as a severe barrier for capability acquisition and early childhood education. Therefore, the present study shows how teenage marriage promotes care penalty that lead to learning deficiency among early children in selected estate communities of the country.

Teenage marriage violates child rights, yet it can be culturally justified as in the estate sector of Sri Lanka (United Nations Population Fund, 2011). This cultural justification encourages teenage girls to think about married life and parents to marry their children off as early as possible. However, teenage marriage compromises the gradual development of girls, which often results in teenage/early pregnancy and age-inappropriate social and economic burdens. This prevents girls from education and vocational training, leading to essential capabilities deprivation while reinforcing issues regarding child learning. Studies show that teenage marriage hampers overall family health and is a barrier to fostering an enabling environment for early childhood care and education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning poverty is defined as being unable to read and comprehend a basic text by age 10 (Wheeler et al., 2014). A rising degree of learning poverty, or an increase in the proportion of children who lack core abilities such as the capacity to read and understand, is an early warning indication that all educational goals leading to sustainable development are in danger. A mountain of data suggests that some children are not learning or accessing learning materials for a range of social, economic, and political reasons. Children's learning crises or deficits in core abilities follow a social gradient, and children from the most deprived groups are most vulnerable (Udayanga, 2018, 2022). Some cultural traits of excluded and impoverished populations are likely to aggravate the learning crises unknowingly.

Even though education is recognized as a viable approach for children in the most vulnerable groups to break the cycle of the poverty trap, it is inaccessible because children's

sociocultural and economic backgrounds prevent them from learning and parents from facilitating their children's education. Despite the assumption that parental support and facilitation are crucial for early childhood learning, not all parents are capable of helping their children owing to sociocultural and economic limitations; as a result, not all children are learning at the same level as their peers. According to the World Bank, the elite obtains a decent public or private education, while the rest must scramble (World Bank, 2014). As a result, compared to well-served and sufficiently facilitated communities, poor and marginalized groups exhibit a growing trend in learning poverty and a deficiency in core skills, which will lead to a future human capital shortfall.

Some of the estate sector-related causes of adolescent marriage are poverty, traditional norms and customary practices, family honour, reacting to unstable sociocultural settings, and female safety. According to several research studies, women who marry at a younger age are more prone to consider domestic abuse occasionally appropriate. Furthermore, women who marry before the age of eighteen have more children than those who marry later in life. When the number of children in a family grows, the children's well-being suffers when the family's money is insufficient to meet the various needs of child care and education. This enhances the household's existing poverty while diminishing family support for child learning.

OBJECTIVES

There are two objectives of the research, such as :

1. Exploring how teenage marriage in the estate sector of Sri Lanka reinforces learning deficiency among early children.
2. Understanding how parents are prevented from facilitating children in learning during their early childhood.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Informed by constructivism and interpretivist epistemological position, the study has employed a qualitative research strategy in this research. The data collection and analysis framework was based on an explorative-case study design. To carry out this research, an embedded single-case design was employed (Yin, 2003). Among several case study designs, an *embedded single-case design* was employed in this research. Embedded single-case design provides an avenue to understand a particular case as embedded in the social context (Yin, 2003). It may consist of a study area encapsulated in a social context.

The participants of this study include twelve mothers with children aged from three to eight, six midwives, five teachers in early childhood development centres, three Plantation Management officers and two Hindu priests. All participants were recruited purposively.

Data were collected from in-depth interviews, focus groups and direct observations. In addition, certain documents provided by the Plantation Human Development Trust and Family Health Bureau were analysed.

Data were analysed according to the grounded theory analysis principles.

Finding and Analysis

Learning poverty means being unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten. The rising level of learning poverty or increasing the number of children who are deprived of foundational skills including the ability to read and understand is an early signal that all educational goals that lead to sustainable development are in deep jeopardy. Even though innovative pedagogical approaches are essential to motivate and empower students to acquire the required standards of education, the findings indicate that having an enabling environment determines children's readiness to learn. However, teenage marriage prevents children from acquiring required early childhood care and education standards.

Among several determinants, preparedness and motivation of learners are vital ingredients for robust early learning, that must be facilitated by parents and significant others in the family. When the family environment does not support motivating children, analysis shows that children are deprived of learning activities.

Teenage marriage hampers girls' rights to education while preventing the building of a managed-happy family life, and it has significant adverse implications such as receiving age-inappropriate experiences and not developing age-appropriate capabilities. Teenage marriage poses an economic burden when both girls and boys are deprived of acquiring certain capabilities. When education is impaired once they married, the opportunities to enter into job market are reduced. As a result, men often seek blue-collar jobs in urban areas, and child mothers have to attend to care work of the family. Child mothers often lack the ability to attend to early stimulation and care responsibilities because they are psychologically unprepared for family life. This prevents them from attending to preparing an enabling environment for children. Lack of education is another determinant that has negative implications for child education. Child mothers often cannot help early children in their education activities when they negotiate between care work and other types of work on the estate. Analysis indicates that parents are less likely to maintain an effective relationship because of the gender segregation of care work and other income-generating activities.

A midwife explains:

Many young girls and boys tend to marry in their teenage years, even though they are not mature enough to form a stable family life. As a result, many families are likely to break apart soon after the marriage because newly married girls and boys are not mature enough to face family issues. In addition, many estate dwellers are relatively less educated. Hence, no adequate concern is given to reproductive health care so that they are often unable to maintain an adequate gap between children.

Furthermore, this idea was supported by a Hindu priest:

Alcohol consumption is a general practice among men in this estate, but women too tend to drink local alcohol in some cases. When families are broken and unstable, both men and women consume liquor excessively as a stress releasing mechanism. Domestic violence is closely related to excessive alcohol consumption. Because of excessive alcohol consumption, certainly financing early health care and education would be difficult.

As the above community participants indicate, the estate dwellers in the studied communities tend to marry at their early ages, even though they are not mentally prepared and mature to form a stable and well-informed family life. As a result, married couples are often likely to break apart when they encounter several problems in terms of income and daily survival once they have given birth to children. Therefore, attention toward early childhood education is deeply neglected. Moreover, family support for early care is disrupted mainly because parents are not well aware of reproductive health and keeping sufficient distance among children. Besides, due to the instability in family life, some inappropriate behaviours emerge as indicated in the above narratives whilst interrupting ECCE in the estate communities.

Even though men are equally responsible for child care, women's contribution to child care and education has been recognised as more important (van Polanen et al., 2017). Care work (including child care and education), as Folbre (2006, 2018) explained, is a moral responsibility of women. Even though childcare and education have been recognised as a moral responsibility of women in the estate sector, women are unable to attend care work due to the absence of age-appropriate experiences. A midwife explains that even though young girls are married because they are physically (biologically) matured, they are not psychologically matured enough to bear a child. Moreover, they do not have relevant skills and experiences to socialise a child; on the other hand, these girls are prevented from obtaining age-appropriate experiences.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the present study demonstrates that a learning deficiency is being fostered in studied estate communities as a result of teenage marriage promoted in their subculture. Teenage marriage alone leads to several societal issues, mainly including girls' care work burden preventing them from attending to childcare needs. Generally, the work of care is understood to be beneficial for family members, but this study argues that the struggle between care work and other income-generating works can foster an uncondusive environment for early learning. However, the support for early learning provided by public and private partnership interventions is good; early learning among children is jeopardized when the surrounding environment does not support it. This study thus argues that adverse implications of teenage marriage will lead to an early learning deficiency in the most vulnerable communities such as the estate sector of Sri Lanka.

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