# Climate crises amplify child marriage across South Asia’s vulnerable communities



Across South Asia, the convergence of climate change and early marriage presents a harrowing reality, where environmental degradation exacerbates long-standing socio-cultural practices. In drought-ravaged regions of Bundelkhand, young girls rise before dawn to collect scarce water supplies, while in flood-impacted Sindh, families navigate life in makeshift camps, grappling with instability and uncertainty. Along the coastlines of Bangladesh, rising sea levels not only threaten livelihoods but also force girls out of educational settings and into early marriages, an intersection of climate crisis and patriarchal norms that is increasingly disconcerting.

The phenomenon of early and forced marriage—often attributed to socio-economic factors or cultural traditions—now takes on new layers due to environmental stresses, fundamentally reshaping familial decisions about the futures of girls. A recent report by Save the Children highlights that nearly two-thirds of child marriages occur in regions facing significant climate risks, with projections showing a potential rise from 30 million to 40 million affected girls by 2050. This stark statistic underscores a grim future where environmental disruptions threaten the very agency and potential of young women.

In South Asia, home to a significant proportion of the world's child brides, the interplay between climate emergencies and systemic gender inequities creates conditions ripe for early marriage. For instance, in regions of Bihar and Bangladesh, where schools often double as shelters during cyclones, educational disruptions contribute to a growing cohort of girls who never return to the classroom. These displacements turn the prospect of marriage from a traditional practice into a perceived necessity for safety and stability.

Economic pressures play a critical role in driving families to marry off daughters. Research by the International Rescue Committee has revealed a striking 39% surge in child marriages following climate-induced disasters in coastal Bangladesh, where financial crises and societal expectations combine to force desperate choices. This trend is mirrored in Pakistan, where flooding has led to increased forced marriages, with families viewing such actions as survival strategies to mitigate the loss of land and secure economic stability.

The structural vulnerabilities faced by marginalized communities further intensify these issues. Events like Nepal’s 2015 earthquake saw significant rises in child marriages among Dalit and indigenous populations, with inadequate state support exacerbating already precarious living conditions. In areas annually afflicted by floods, including parts of Assam and Odisha, fear of trafficking and violence leads families to preemptively marry off daughters as a means of protection.

Alarmingly, the legal frameworks that should safeguard against child marriage are often the weakest in crisis-affected areas. Many South Asian nations have established a legal minimum age for marriage at 18, yet loopholes and inconsistent enforcement undermine these protections. For example, a 2017 amendment in Bangladesh allows for marriages under the legal age in "special circumstances," creating opportunities for exploitation.

Despite mounting evidence linking climate change to child marriage, national climate adaptation strategies frequently overlook the unique vulnerabilities faced by adolescent girls. Resilience is typically quantified through infrastructure improvements and economic recovery, sidelining social systems critical to safeguarding young women's rights. Experts argue that if girls remain the first to exit education and the last to find support in crises, the issue is not peripheral; it is central to effective climate adaptation and development.

Initiatives like Climate Brides aim to elevate these critical conversations, documenting how climate change is not merely a backdrop but a driving force behind the challenges faced by young girls. Their open-source platform includes a thematic map that illustrates the collapse of reproductive health systems in disaster-stricken areas and reveals the invisible labour young girls perform in times of crisis.

Addressing the intersection of climate change and child marriage requires a paradigm shift towards viewing marriage as a public consequence of systemic failures rather than a private choice. Strategies must include ensuring continuity in education during crises, investing in gender-responsive early warning systems, and providing conditional financial support to families that prioritise girls’ education.

In a region where climate risks and gender inequalities intersect dramatically, combatting child marriage must take precedence. For families forced to make life-altering decisions due to environmental neglect, the systemic failures that drive early marriage lie firmly with society. Redefining climate resilience means not just rebuilding infrastructures but ensuring that girls reclaim their right to an education and a future free from the spectre of marriage as a survival tactic.

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### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082817/climate-change-is-eroding-safety-nets-accelerating-child-marriage-in-south-asia), [[4]](https://blogs.bmj.com/bmjgh/2024/09/30/monsoon-child-brides-the-hidden-cost-of-climate-crisis-in-pakistan/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082817/climate-change-is-eroding-safety-nets-accelerating-child-marriage-in-south-asia), [[2]](https://www.rescue.org/press-release/bangladesh-irc-study-reveals-staggering-39-surge-child-marriage-due-climate-change), [[5]](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/08/230829124821.htm)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/09/01/forced-marriages-on-the-rise-in-pakistan-due-to-climate-change_6724203_114.html), [[6]](https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/monsoon-brides-extreme-weather-fuels-pakistan-child-marriages-750647)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/09/01/forced-marriages-on-the-rise-in-pakistan-due-to-climate-change_6724203_114.html), [[4]](https://blogs.bmj.com/bmjgh/2024/09/30/monsoon-child-brides-the-hidden-cost-of-climate-crisis-in-pakistan/), [[6]](https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/monsoon-brides-extreme-weather-fuels-pakistan-child-marriages-750647)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/south-asia-could-eliminate-child-marriage-only-55years-unicef)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082817/climate-change-is-eroding-safety-nets-accelerating-child-marriage-in-south-asia), [[5]](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/08/230829124821.htm)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082817/climate-change-is-eroding-safety-nets-accelerating-child-marriage-in-south-asia), [[2]](https://www.rescue.org/press-release/bangladesh-irc-study-reveals-staggering-39-surge-child-marriage-due-climate-change), [[3]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/09/01/forced-marriages-on-the-rise-in-pakistan-due-to-climate-change_6724203_114.html)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082817/climate-change-is-eroding-safety-nets-accelerating-child-marriage-in-south-asia), [[4]](https://blogs.bmj.com/bmjgh/2024/09/30/monsoon-child-brides-the-hidden-cost-of-climate-crisis-in-pakistan/)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://scroll.in/article/1082817/climate-change-is-eroding-safety-nets-accelerating-child-marriage-in-south-asia)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://scroll.in/article/1082817/climate-change-is-eroding-safety-nets-accelerating-child-marriage-in-south-asia> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/bangladesh-irc-study-reveals-staggering-39-surge-child-marriage-due-climate-change> - A 2023 study by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Bangladesh's coastal regions, including Bhola and Shatkhira, found a 39% increase in child marriages following climate-induced disasters. The research identified economic hardship, societal pressures, and financial crises as key drivers of this surge. The IRC calls for increased and sustainable funding to address this compounded crisis and protect children from harm due to climate change and its impacts.
3. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/09/01/forced-marriages-on-the-rise-in-pakistan-due-to-climate-change_6724203_114.html> - In Pakistan, forced child marriages are increasing due to climate change-induced flooding, especially in poor, rural communities. A 2024 report highlights that families, having lost their land to severe monsoons, are marrying off daughters as a survival strategy. The study underscores the link between natural disasters and rising child marriages, urging for education and skill development to combat this issue.
4. <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmjgh/2024/09/30/monsoon-child-brides-the-hidden-cost-of-climate-crisis-in-pakistan/> - The term 'monsoon child brides' in Pakistan represents a socio-cultural crisis where traditions and economic desperation force young girls into early marriage, exacerbated by climate change. Reports indicate that nearly 45 underage girls have been married in Dadu, Sindh Province, in exchange for money to survive flooding and food insecurity. The study highlights the interplay between socio-cultural traditions and climate-induced economic pressures leading to child marriages.
5. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/08/230829124821.htm> - A 2023 study found that in Bangladesh, during heatwaves lasting over 30 days, 11- to 14-year-old girls were 50% more likely to marry, and girls aged 15-17 were 30% more likely. The study suggests that child marriage is often seen as a coping strategy to reduce economic vulnerability and food insecurity caused by disasters, with regional customs like bride price influencing this trend.
6. <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/monsoon-brides-extreme-weather-fuels-pakistan-child-marriages-750647> - In Pakistan, unprecedented floods in 2022 have led to an increase in child marriages, with rights workers warning that such weddings are now on the rise due to climate-driven economic insecurity. The report highlights cases where families, facing the threat of floods, have married off young daughters in exchange for money, viewing it as a means to secure a more prosperous life amidst the crisis.
7. <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/south-asia-could-eliminate-child-marriage-only-55years-unicef> - UNICEF's 2023 analysis indicates that South Asia could eliminate child marriage in about 55 years, with a decline from 46% to 26% in the last decade. However, climate catastrophes, economic shocks, and the ongoing fallout from COVID-19 threaten to reverse these gains, as nearly half of the world's child brides reside in the region, with India accounting for one-third of the global total.