Factors affecting girl child marriage in Mizoram: Spatio-temporal analysis

K. C. Lalmalsawmzauva*, and F. VLH Zuali, Mizoram

Abstract

This study examined factors affecting girl-child marriage in Mizoram, a state of India with an overwhelming concentration of tribal population. Among many factors that can affect girl child marriage, emphasis has been laid on the role of education and poverty influencing underage marriage among girls. The study is based on data available from the Mizoram Economic Survey and the National Family Health Survey. The research includes only married girls in the age group of 20-24 years who married before attaining 18 years of age in 8 districts of Mizoram. Mizoram is one of the northeastern states with a high literacy rate and an equally high level of urbanization. Though the state has fewer records of child marriage and is far better compared with many other states of India, this research investigates the role of education and poverty influencing child marriages among those who still practice it as a deviation from the rule. Like many parts of the world, it is found that there is a strong negative correlation between literacy and child marriage while there is a moderate positive correlation between poverty and child marriage in Mizoram.

Keywords: *Girl child marriage, education, poverty, correlation, Mizoram.*

Introduction

The prevalence of child marriages particularly among girls, though declining, is not uncommon in many societies including the tribal and indigenous communities of the world including India. It is persistent in some cultures and regions and among the poor and the rural areas (Paul, 2020). The practice among some of the particularly vulnerable tribal groups spread across diverse regions of India has forced governments to extend financial incentives to these marginalized communities to opt for higher age at marriage for girls. Significantly a parliament panel reported that around 30 percent of tribal girls in India marry before attaining the legal age

(The New Indian Express, 2023). While this may be true of other regions, the mean age at marriage among the tribal groups of the North East is comparatively higher than tribes living in other states and the spousal age gap too is decreasing over time (Jeermison and Sahoo, 2019). Tender-age marriages in India are influenced by tradition and custom but are subject to changes due to modernization coming through forces like education and urbanization. Educational attainment and wealth status of the household are identified as the most significant correlates of female child marriage in India (Paul, 2020). While the change towards higher age at marriage is

discernible in all parts of India, incidences of poverty and lack of education continue to influence families to go ahead with the underage marriage of their girl children.

United World Schools (UWA), an NGO that works closely with local communities around the world reported that each year the incidence of child marriage undermines global efforts to improve girls' education, as many girls drop out of school to marry at an early age. Child marriage is both a cause and a consequence of poor educational attainment for girls. Some studies also proved that the education a girl receives is the strongest indicator of the age she will marry and there is a good number of literature showing the negative consequences associated with low education, including lower wages and higher unemployment rates (Katz and Autor 1999; Berger and Leigh 1989; Lleras-Muney 2005), and higher crime rates.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 2019 reported that around 750 million women and girls were married as children while 150 million more girls will be married by 2030 because of poverty, food insecurity, lack of education, gender inequality, less economic growth, human rights violations and injustice. Child marriage is most common in the poorest countries and developing world that have fewer resources and opportunities to invest in alternative options for girls. In sharp contrast, most European countries and Asian countries like Japan and Korea prefer later marriages (Lesthaeghe and Moors 2000). Several explanations have been proposed for the general trend of delay in marriage timing: ideational changes, spending more time in the educational system, and rising women's labour force participation (Blossfeld and Huinink 1991). Malhotra (1997) discussed rural-urban and gender variations of marriage age in Central Java by mentioning that there is not much difference in the modern society in Java and no gender differences with regard to the marriage process and gender roles than are traditional social contexts. When girls spend more time in the educational system, they usually delay marriage because they do not perceive themselves, or are not regarded by others, as ready for independent family life (Furstenberg *et al.* 2004). They compared the American youngsters in the past after the Second World War and the present generation and found that those past generations were getting secure jobs after graduation in their early twenties and took full responsibility and started a family. Similarly, women folks too were raising kids in their early twenties while the present generation lingered in a state of semi-autonomy, waiting until they were sufficiently well-off to marry with only semi-autonomy and spend more time in education and career advancement that delayed marriage.

According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), girls with either no or below primary level education in India have experienced more child marriage as 48 percent of girls with no education were married below 18 years of age as compared to only 4 percent among those who attained higher education. Another striking feature is the role of poverty on child marriage while looking closely at the parameter of wealth index as NFHS-5 data shows that a staggering 40 percent of the girls from the lowest quintile were married before they turned 18 years of age. In contrast to this, only 8 percent of girls from the highest quintile got married before 18. It is clear from these studies that the

socio-economic development and female age at marriage is strongly related. Mizoram is no exception (Lalmalsawmzauva et.al, 2011).

The NFHS data shows that the age of marriage in India is increasing over time. The median age of first marriage (among women 20–49 years of age) has increased by two years during the last decade and a half, from 17.2 years in 2005–06 to 19.2 years in 2019–21. For men (aged 25-29), this increased from 22.6 to 24.9 during the same period. The total fertility rate in India is 2.0 while it is marginally lower at 1.9 in Mizoram (NFHS-5) - below the replacement level of 2.1. NFHS-5 (2019-2020) revealed that underage marriage is still prevalent in many states of India including West Bengal (41.6%), Bihar (40.8%), Tripura (40.1%), Jharkhand (32.2 %), Assam (31.8%), Andhra Pradesh (29.3%), Rajasthan (25.4%), Telangana (23.5%), Madhya Pradesh (23.1%), and Maharashtra (21.9%). Significantly, child marriage is less common in the northeastern states of India, except Tripura and Assam where the majority of the population is non-tribal compared with other states of India. The two tribal-dominant northeastern states - Nagaland (86.5% tribal population) and Mizoram (94.4% tribal population) - display the lowest incidence of child marriages of 5.6 percent and 8 percent respectively.

Though the prevalence of child marriage is lower than in most states of India, Mizoram displays significant intra-state variation with regard to girl-child marriages. Such variations are inexplicable in a small state like Mizoram with little cultural diversity and characterized by an egalitarian social structure. It may be interesting to examine the pattern of this variance and the trends of child marriage prevalence at lower aggregate levels to achieve a better insight into the factors responsible for the persistence of the practice despite an overwhelming proportion at the aggregate level opting for late marriage. This is even more important in the context of the state which boasts of universal literacy and the second-highest level of urbanization among the states of India. It is pertinent that despite the centrality of education and poverty as determinants of the age of marriage in many parts of the world, there is no guarantee that the same causal relationship will exist in the case of Mizoram or for some regions and communities in the state. The present research finds out, inter alia, the role of poverty and female education as determinants of the persistence of early marriage for those girls in Mizoram in a situation of overall higher age at marriage practiced by the overwhelming majority.

The study area

Mizoram is strikingly different from the rest of India (Fig. 1) as it is the second highest literate state and second most urbanized state in India, largely considered as a positive influence on late marriage. On the other hand, Mizoram has the highest proportion of the Schedule Tribe population (94.4%) among the Indian states with 87.16 percent of the population following Christian faith. The status of the Scheduled Tribe is an indicator of economic backwardness all over India. Another negative factor is that Mizoram is a late starter in the path of development, particularly the year plan of India, compared with many other Indian states is economically backward and state is simply dependent on Central government funds, which may have impacts on the age of marriage and family planning as well. The cultural factor may also indirectly play a significant role,
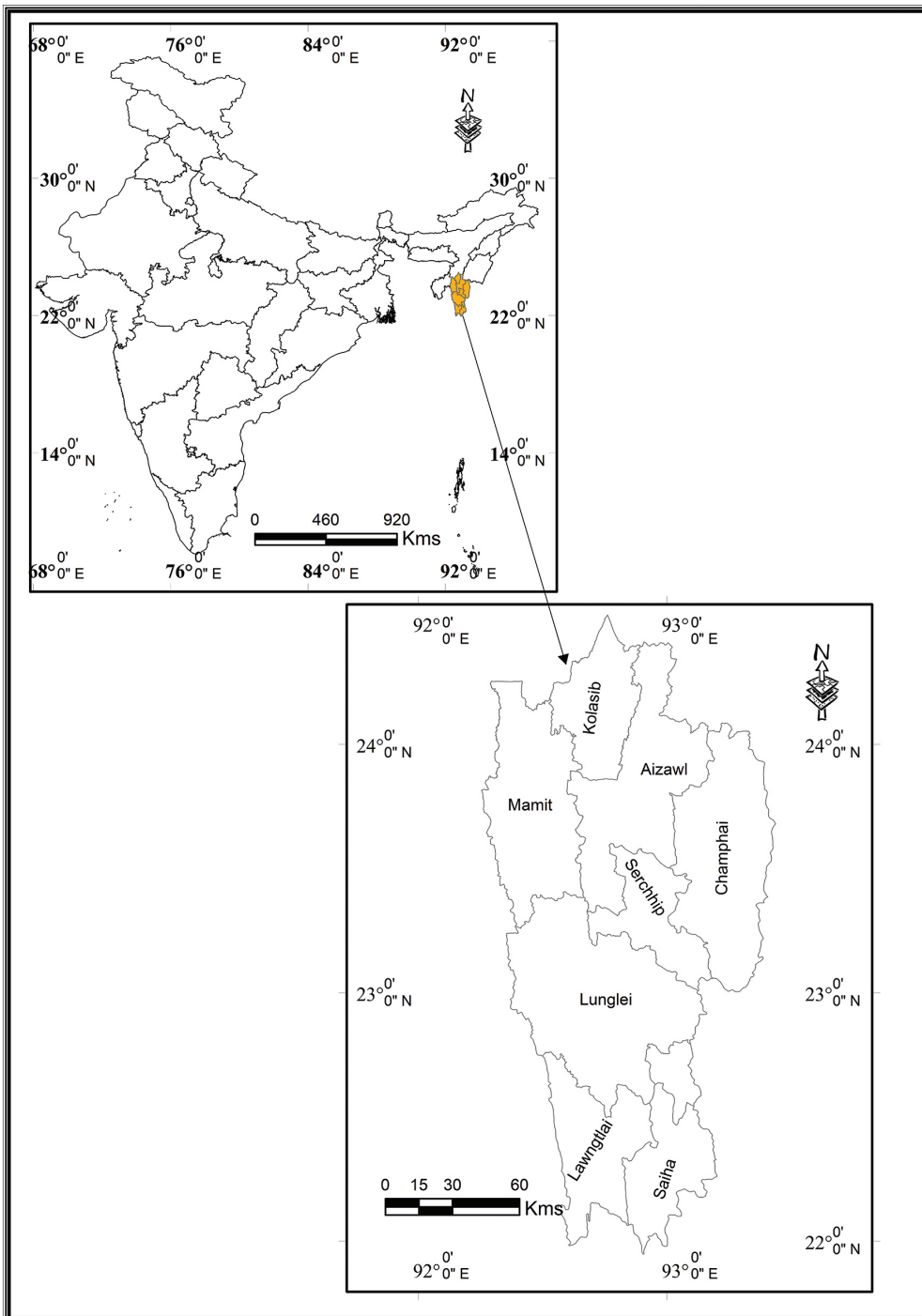
Fig. 1: Location of the study area

as it is closely linked with economic status. In an agricultural society like Mizoram, the majority of the population still depends on shifting cultivation, which is primitive, unproductive and labour-intensive. Due to the high demand for labour in the agricultural field, many youngsters could not continue schooling leading to increasing school dropout having an impact on early marriage.

Out of 29 states in India, Mizoram holds 24th rank in terms of prevalence of child marriage, which means Mizoram performed far better than many other states of India. With just 8 percent child marriage prevalence (NFHS-5), the performance of Mizoram appears to be highly satisfactory when compared with many other states of India. However, closure scrutiny reveals that there exists enormous variation in the practice of girl-child marriage at lower spatial units at the district level. There are pockets within the state that need special attention so that the state will achieve child marriage-free status.

The present research finds out the relationship between child marriage and education as well as child marriage and poverty across the districts of Mizoram with the assumption that districts having higher literacy rates of women are likely to have a lesser number of girl-child marriages and *vice-versa*. The research also assumed that the number of Below Poverty Line (BPL) families will have influenced the prevalence of child marriage across the district.

Objectives

Given the broad outline of the research problem and its scope, the following specific objectives are placed before this research:

1) To analyse spatiotemporal changes in the pattern of the incidence of girl-child marriage in Mizoram

2) To assess the influence of education on under-age girl child marriage in the study area

3) To examine how poverty influences the age of girl-child marriage in Mizoram

Materials and methods

There are two sets of data utilized for the present study. One is a times series data of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) rounds three, four and five conducted in the years 2005-06, 2015-16 & 2019-20 respectively. These three-time series data have been utilized mainly because they are the only comprehensive sources of information, which are comparable and consistent relating to girl-child marriage at the district level. Another source of information is the Mizoram Economic Survey, 2018-19, which is particularly useful for analyzing the level of poverty at the district level. Besides, spatio-temporal change has been assessed across the eight districts of Mizoram on girl-child marriage. For spatial analysis, the Mizoram district fact sheet of the latest series of NFHS-5 is used. The age group of the present research is women aged 20-24 years who married before 18 years. This age group is taken into account in this research as they represent the younger age group to understand the latest situation of the prevalence of underage marriage across the district of Mizoram. Karl Pearson's correlation coefficient method was employed to find out the relationship between girl-child marriage and female literacy in Mizoram.

Results and discussion

This section covers four important aspects such as a temporal change in child marriage in Mizoram, a spatiotemporal change in child marriage across the districts of Mizoram,
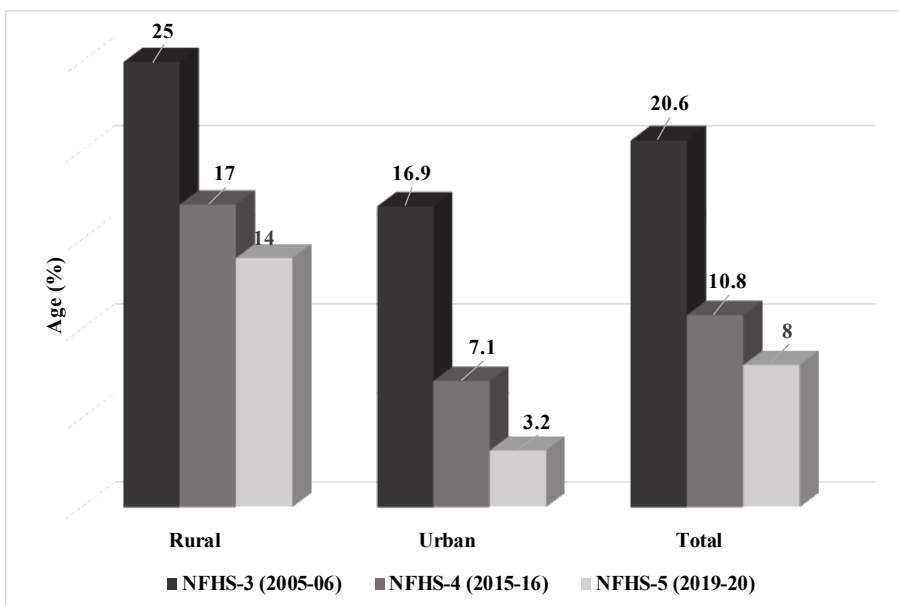
Fig. 2: Mizoram: Women aged 20-24 years married before age 18 years (%)

Spatial analysis of girl-child marriage and female literacy in Mizoram and the correlation between girl-child marriage and female literacy in Mizoram. The first three aspects are mainly based on the prevalence of underage marriage or girl child marriage in Mizoram both in time and space.

Temporal changes of child marriage in Mizoram

It is the general trend across the world that early marriage has been declining over time. It is also true in the context of Mizoram. Figure 2 shows that there has been a sharp decline in underage marriage in the last 15 years in Mizoram among women aged 20-24 years from 20.6 percent in 2005-06 to 10.8 percent in the year 2015-16 and to 8 percent in 2019-2020.

The incidence of girl child marriage is relatively higher in rural areas of Mizoram in all the years. For example, it was as high as 25 percent in 2005-6 compared to only 6.9 percent in urban Mizoram. The corresponding figure in 2019-20 was 14 percent and 3.2 percent for rural and urban areas respectively.

Spatio-temporal changes of child marriage in Mizoram

The spatial pattern in girl-child marriages shows glaring variation in the incidence of such cases. Figures 2 and 3 show a general decline in the proportion of child marriage cases during 2015-6 and 2019-20 except in Serchhip, Lawngtlai and Saiha districts which ironically reported an increase in the percentage of under-age marriages among the girls. Lunglei district recorded the sharpest decline in girl-child marriages. Lawngtlai district on the other hand reported the largest increase in under-age marriages.

According to the latest NFHS-5, conducted during 2019-20, Mamit district records the highest girl child marriages (16.8%) closely followed by Lawngtlai (16%) and Kolasib district (13.7%). On the

Table 1: Girl child marriage and female literacy in Mizoram

Districts	Female literacy rate (%)	Rank	%Women aged 20-24 years married before 18 years	Rank
Serchhip	99.7	1	7.2	6
Aizawl	98.9	2	3.2	8
Champhai	97.7	3	11	5
Kolasib	96.9	4	13.7	3
Saiha	95.1	5	11.8	4
Lunglei	91.6	6	4.8	7
Mamit	89.6	7	16.8	1
Lawngtlai	76	8	16	2

Source: District Fact Sheets, National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-20)

other hand, the Aizawl and Lunglei districts recorded the lowest incidence of girl-child marriages, i.e. 3.2 and 4.8 percent respectively. Notably, both Mamit and Lawngtlai are two districts largely rural in their population composition and have much lower literacy rates compared with other districts of Mizoram. Moreover, it might be mentioned that Mamit and Lawngtlai districts record higher concentrations of non-Mizo ethnic groups like Bru and Chakma populations compared with other districts of Mizoram. This may partly explain the relatively high and persistent under-age marriage in this area due largely to anthropological factors.

Girl-child marriage and female literacy

This section tries to find the possible relationship between two important variables of child marriage and female literacy in Mizoram by using the ranking method. It is expected, like much literature revealed, that there might be a negative association between child marriage and education in the state of Mizoram.

Out of the eight districts, Serchhip has the highest proportion of literate not only in Mizoram but also stood first among all the 766 districts of India achieving full literacy status

(Table 1). Over 90 percent of the population in Aizawl, Champhai, Kolasib, Saiha and Lunglei is literate while the proportion of the literate population is close to 90 percent in the Mamit district (Fig. 4). Only the Lawngtlai district has more illiterate in its population with a literacy rate of 76 percent only. There is a broad negative association between literacy level and child marriage incidence when the two variables are compared at the district level.

When it comes to ranking of literacy rate and prevalence of underage marriage across the districts of Mizoram, one can make out that there seems to be a negative relationship between literacy and underage marriage. Serchhip and Aizawl districts being the highest literate districts record one of the lowest child marriage rates among the eight districts of Mizoram. On the other hand, the lowest literate districts of Lawngtlai and Mamit scored the highest underage marriage among the districts. It may be noted that these two districts have a higher proportion of non-Mizos in their population. It may be concluded that a high literacy rate is coterminous with a lower prevalence of underage marriage and vice versa.
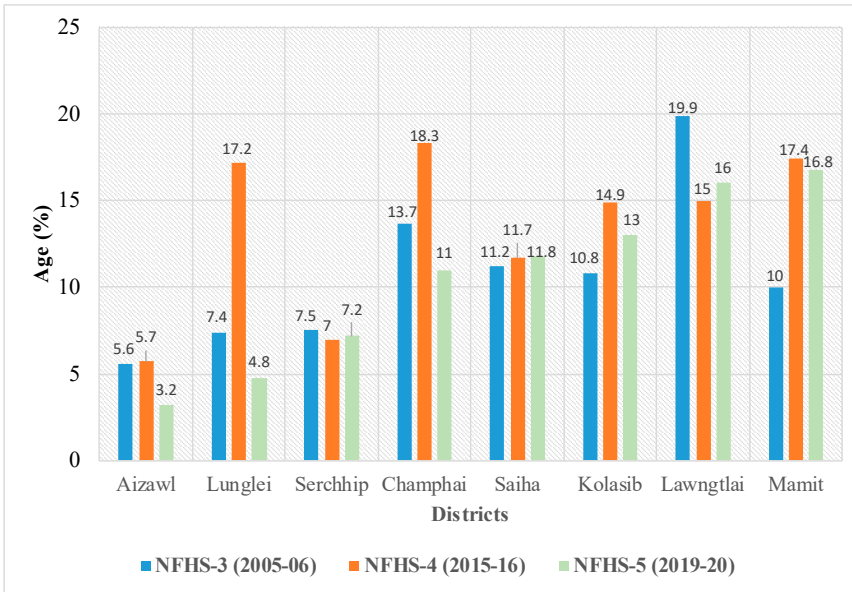
Fig. 3: Mizoram: Women aged 20-24 years married before attaining 18 years of age (%)
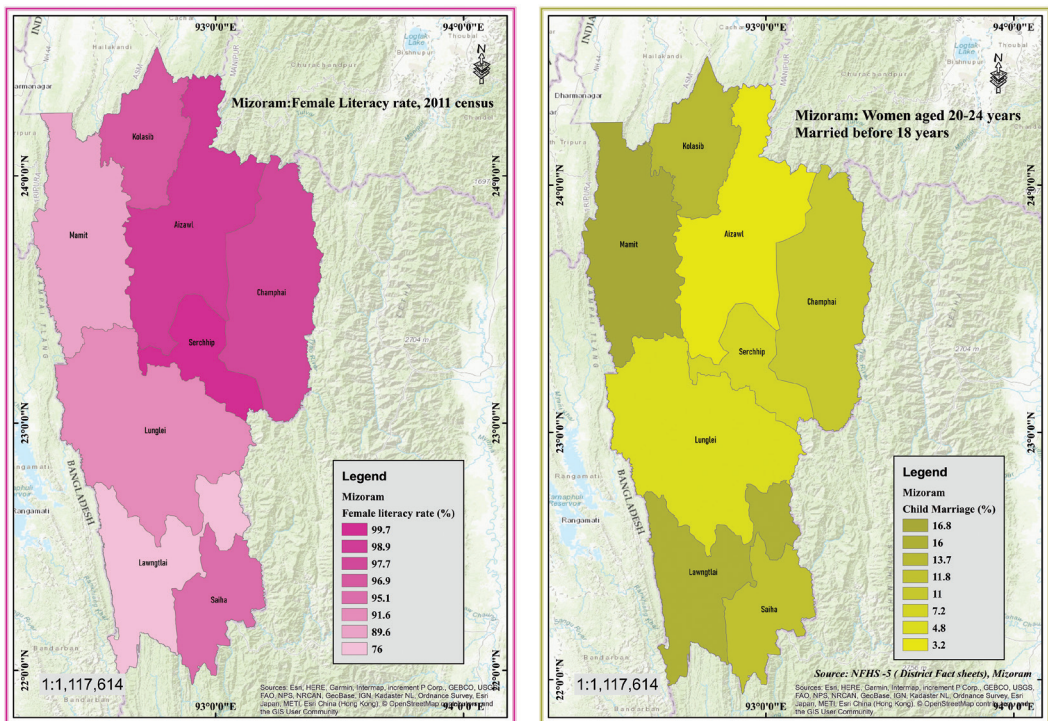

Fig. 4: Female literacy and child marriage in Mizoram

Table 2: Girl child marriage and poverty : Inter-district variation

District	Poverty (BPL)**	Rank	Women aged 20-24 years married before age 18 years (%)*	Rank
Mamit	35.64	1	16.8	1
Saiha	31.64	2	11.8	4
Lunglei	30.1	3	4.8	7
Lawngtlai	21.37	4	16	2
Kolasib	17.5	5	13.7	3
Serchhip	12.79	6	7.2	6
Champhai	9.35	7	11	5
Aizawl	8.76	8	3.2	8

Source: District Fact Sheets, National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-20) &
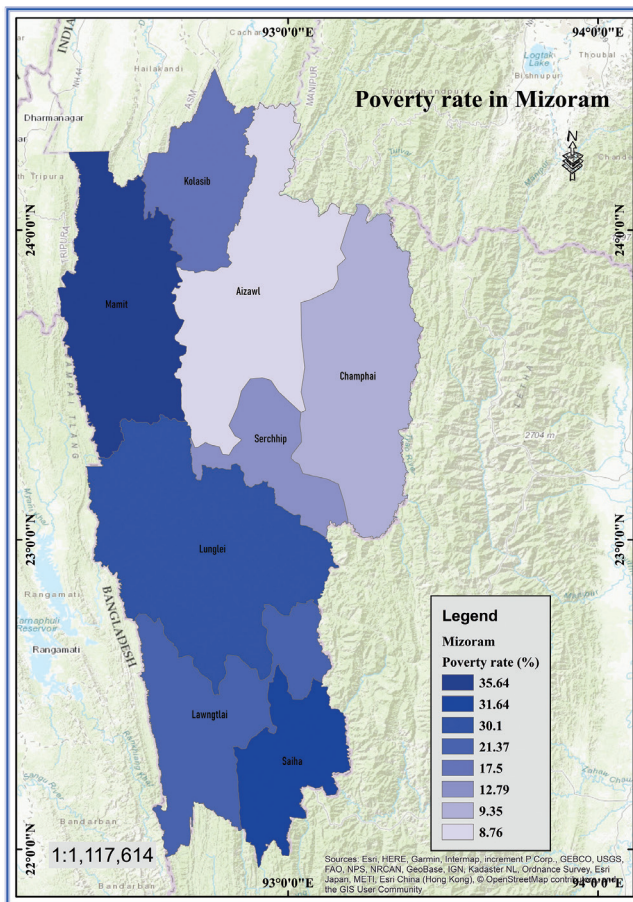BPL=Below Poverty Line Family based on Mizoram Economic Survey, 2017-18***

Fig. 5: Poverty in Mizoram

Girl-child marriage and poverty

This section explores the association of poverty and child marriage across the districts of Mizoram by ranking methods.

In terms of poverty ranking, Mamit district, the aspirational district of the Central government, became the first rank, followed by Saiha, Lunglei, Lawngtlai, Kolasib, Serchhip, Champhai and Aizawl districts. It is interesting to observe that there is a positive correlation between poverty and the prevalence of underage marriage among the districts. Table 2 shows that Mamit district has having highest proportion of poor families going by the proportion of families below the poverty line (35.64%), followed by Saiha district (31.64%). Interestingly, these two districts have the highest number of underage marriages with 16.8 percent and 11.8 percent respectively (Fig. 5). Similarly, Aizawl records the lowest poverty rate record the lowest record of underage marriage among the eight districts. However, the associations between these two variables seem weak in other districts.

Correlation between girl child marriage, female literacy and poverty

Statistical analysis clearly reveals that there is a negative correlation between female literacy and girl-child marriage in Mizoram with r= -0.74, which is highly significant. This means that with increasing female literacy child marriage decreases and vice versa across the district of Mizoram.

It is clear that poverty and child marriages in Mizoram are positively correlated *(r=0.405)*, which means where there is a high incidence of poverty there exists a higher prevalence of child marriage in Mizoram though not strongly so indicating the possibility of the role of factors other than poverty influencing child marriage in the state. The reason for child marriage is complex as it can differ from one social context to another setting. Apart from education and poverty, it can be locational and geographical factors like accessibility and remoteness. It is also believed, but not validated yet, that ethnicity and social practices like custom, religion and mores seem working on the ground level in Mizoram as child marriage is relatively common among non-Mizo communities like the Bru and the Chakma population, comparatively less developed, more remotely settled and more tied with traditional practices. However, all these probable factors need further research.

Conclusion

Evidently, the state of Mizoram has its unique problems of inter-district variation in female literacy rate ranging from 76 percent in Lawngtlai to 99.7 percent in Serchhip district as well as a huge poverty gap of just 8 percent in Aizawl district to as much as 35.64 percent in Mamit district. The study reveals that there is an improvement when looking at the temporal change in girl-child marriage in Mizoram. The rate of decline during three series of NFHS data seems inconsistent as there exists a huge variation between NFHS-3 and 4 while the declining rate during NFHS-4 and 5 is merely a little over 2 percent. Apart from these temporal changes, there is still significant spatial variation across the districts. For example, districts like Champhai, Kolasib, Lunglei, Mamit and Saiha reported that child marriage was increasing from NFHS-3 to NFHS-4, something that is highly unusual and necessitating further field-based research, particularly with regard

to a substantial increase in child marriage in Lunglei and Champhai districts during NFHS-3 and NFSH-4.

The correlation coefficient clearly proved that there is a strong negative correlation between education and child marriage. Similarly, there is a moderate positive correlation between poverty and child marriage in Mizoram. Between the two independent variables, the role of education in child marriage is more fundamental than the role of poverty on child marriage. However, at the micro-level analysis the role of education might not be more important than poverty as the ability to schooling and education itself is inextricably intertwined with household wealth or poverty.

Competing interest

The corresponding author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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K. C. Lalmalsawmzauva*
Assistant Professor
Department of Geography &
Resource Management
Mizoram University,
Aizawl, Mizoram

F. VLH Zuali
Research Scholar
Department of Geography &
Resource Management
Mizoram University,
Aizawl, Mizoram

*Author for correspondence
E-mail: Mzut154@mzu.edu.in,
kcsawmtea3@gmail.com