

**Consequences of early marriage on young women's lives and reproductive health and choices:
Evidence from the *Youth in India, Situation and Needs Study***

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Abstract: In India, substantial proportions of girls continue to marry in adolescence. However, evidence on ways in which early marriage limits girl's lives and compromises their reproductive health and choices is limited. Drawing on data from a representative survey of young people in five states, namely, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Rajasthan, this paper examines the consequences of early marriage on the nature of married life, young women's agency and gender role attitudes, and their sexual and reproductive practices. Findings suggest that early marriage inhibits young women's involvement in marriage related planning and their decision-making autonomy. It also places young women at risk of physical and sexual violence within marriage. It inhibits them from adopting gender egalitarian attitudes. Finally, women married early were less likely to have used contraceptives to delay the first pregnancy and experienced institutional delivery; conversely, they were more likely to have experienced pregnancy loss.

Background: The policy and programme discourse around early marriage has increased significantly over the last decade in India. For example, several national level policies formulated since 2000, including the National Population Policy 2000 (MOHFW, 2000), the National Youth Policy 2003 (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2003) and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2001) and most recently the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2006) have advocated special programmatic attention to delay age at marriage and to enforce existing laws against child marriage. Programmatically also, several initiatives were launched to prevent early marriage (see for example Das Gupta and Pande, 2008). Despite these commitments, substantial proportions of girls continue to marry in adolescence. As recently as in 2005-2006, almost half (47%) of women aged 20-24 were married by 18 years nationally (IIPS and Macro International, 2007). This proportion is as high as between one in two to three in five in several states.

It is generally argued that a number of social, economic and health disadvantages are associated with early marriage (Jain and Kurz, 2007; Mathur, Greene and Malhotra, 2003; Mensch, Singh and Casterline, 2005; UNICEF, 2005). For example, early marriage tends to curtail girls' educational opportunities and girls who marry early tend to have low levels of educational attainment (ICDDR, 2007; Mensch, Bruce and Greene, 1998; Lloyd and Mensch, 2006). Likewise, studies in diverse settings have found that girls married at young ages may be less capable of asserting themselves in the marital relationship, which may place them at higher risk of experiencing physical and sexual violence (ICRW, 2005; Jensen and Thornton, 2003; Khan et al., 2002; Joshi et al., 2001; Ouattara et al., 1998; Puri et al., 2003). Moreover, early marriage coincides with early childbearing for most girls and it is widely established that first-time mothers below the age 16, in addition to the normal risks and responsibilities of childbearing, face an

increased risk of maternal and infant mortality (Miller and Lester, 2003; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2005; UNICEF, 2001). Emerging evidence also suggests that early marriage may place young women at heightened risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV (Bruce and Clark 2004; Clark 2004).

In India, while the situation of married young women has been increasingly documented (Alexander et al., 2006; Barua and Kurz, 2001; IIPS and Macro International, 2007; IIPS and ORC Macro, 2000; Ram et al., 2006; Santhya and Jejeebhoy, 2003; Ram et. al. 2008), evidence on the ways in which early marriage limits girls' lives and compromises their reproductive health and choices is limited. Specifically, little is known about how marriage practices, including type of marriage and young women's involvement in the process of spouse selection varies between women married early and those married late. Similarly, there is little documented evidence on whether or not the nature of married life, including spousal communication and interaction, and power in marital relationships differs between women married early and those married late. Evidence is also limited on the extent to which women married early differ in terms of self-efficacy and gender role attitudes compared to those married late. Finally, though not as under-researched as themes highlighted above, evidence on the extent to which sexual and reproductive practices vary by age at marriage is also somewhat limited.

This paper aims to address these gaps in evidence by comparing data pertaining to young women married at ages below 18 and those married at 18 years or above from a large-scale representative survey of young people in both rural and urban settings in the five states of India, namely, Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, conducted as part of a sub-nationally representative study undertaken for the first time in India of key transitions experienced by young people.

Study setting

The study was conducted in representative samples drawn from both rural and urban areas of six states in India, namely Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. Young people in these states together account for 39% of the total youth population in the country (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2001a). Distributions of the youth population in these states taken together by age, level of literacy, religion, caste and marital status were similar to that of the youth population nationally.

Of the six states, child marriages are extremely common in five, namely Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. Indeed, in these states, between two-fifths and two-thirds of young women aged 20-24 were married before age 18, compared to many fewer – one-fifth – in the sixth state, Tamil Nadu (IIPS and Macro International, 2007). This paper focuses therefore on data from the five states characterised by widespread early marriage.

Despite similarities in child marriage levels, these five states differed in many respects. Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra are among the more economically progressive states in the country, accounting for 7-13% each of the national Gross Domestic Product, while Bihar, Jharkhand and Rajasthan are among the lesser developed states, accounting for 2-4% each (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2008). Maharashtra is among the most urbanised states, with over two-fifths of their populations living in urban areas. In contrast, Bihar, Jharkhand and Rajasthan are characterised by large rural populations, with just one-tenth to one-fifth of their populations living in urban areas (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2001c).

There is considerable variation among these states in terms of social indicators as well. For example, while three-quarters of the population aged 7 and above in Maharashtra and three-fifths in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were literate in 2001, fewer were literate in Jharkhand (54%) and Bihar (47%).

The achievements in the health sector also vary notably across the five states. For example, life expectancy for females is higher than the national average in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, but lower in Bihar, Jharkhand and Rajasthan during 2001-05 (Office of the Registrar General, 2007). Infant mortality rates varied from a lowest of 37.5 in Maharashtra to as high as 69 in Jharkhand during 2005-06. By 2005-6, the total fertility rate had dropped to replacement level or below in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. In contrast, the rate was well above the replacement level in the remaining three states (IIPS and Macro International, 2007).

Methodology

Study design

The study comprised three phases: a pre-survey qualitative phase, a survey of married and unmarried young women and men and post-survey in-depth interviews with selected survey respondents. Data presented in this paper are drawn from the survey.

The survey focused on married and unmarried young women and unmarried young men aged 15-24 and, because of the paucity of married young men in the younger ages, married men aged 15-29 in both rural and urban settings. The study treated rural and urban areas as independent sampling domains and a systematic, multi-stage stratified sampling design was adopted to draw sample areas independently for each of these two domains. In order to avoid potential risks associated with interviewing both women and men from the same PSU, interviews were conducted in separate PSUs for female and male respondents. In each PSU, households to be interviewed were selected by systematic sampling. Within each selected household, no more than one respondent was interviewed from one category, resulting in a maximum of two interviews (with one married and one unmarried respondent) from any household. In case more than one respondent from a single category was found in the household, one respondent was selected randomly, and no replacement of the respondent selected was allowed.

Fieldwork for the five states discussed in this paper was undertaken in two phases (in Jharkhand and Maharashtra during 2006 and Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan during 2007-08). About 138,000 households were enumerated and a total of 42,852 young people were successfully interviewed from these households in the five states (6,730 married young men, 9,856 unmarried young men, 11,905 married young women and 14,361 unmarried young women). Response rates for individual interviews were in the range of 85-90%. The main reason for non-response was that the respondent was not at home. Only one percent or fewer respondents refused to participate in the interview.

Four individual questionnaires, one each for married young men, married young women, unmarried young men and unmarried young women were developed. The development of individual questionnaires was informed by other survey instruments and insights obtained in the pre-survey qualitative phase. The survey instrument was finalized after extensive pre-testing. The individual questionnaire contained questions on background characteristics, parental interaction, gender role attitudes and self-efficacy, awareness of sexual and reproductive matters, connectedness and friendship, premarital sexual relationships and views on pre-marital sexual relations, marriage process, married life, including domestic and sexual violence, health and

health seeking, substance use and violence, media exposure and participation in youth programmes.

Questions related to marriage explored marriage planning, dowry, the participation of the respondent in decision-making related to marriage and the respondent's feelings about his/her marriage, the nature of marriage (love or arranged), age at co-habitation, acquaintance with spouse before marriage, marital relationship with spouse, including communication, joint decision-making, the nature of the first sexual experience within marriage and experience of physical and sexual violence, pregnancy experiences and outcomes, and contraceptive practice.

Data presented in this paper are drawn from a sub-sample of 8,314 married young women aged 20-24 at the time of the interview.

Variables

Early marriage is defined as marriage prior to age 18, and late marriage as marriage at age or after 18. In order to explore the ways in which early marriage compromises girls' lives and reproductive health and choices, several indicators measuring young women's involvement in marriage related planning, nature of the marital relationship, young women's agency and gender role attitudes, sexual and reproductive health knowledge and contraceptive and pregnancy-related experiences were considered. Specifically, young women's involvement in marriage related planning was captured by a dichotomous variable that took into consideration the following aspects: whether parents sought young women's opinion about when to get married, whether parents sought young women's opinion about the spouse chosen, whether young women ever had a chance to meet or talk to their future spouse, and whether young women had a love marriage or arranged marriage. Young women were considered to have been involved in marriage related planning if (a) their parents sought their opinion about the timing of marriage and choice of spouse and if they had a chance to meet or talk to their spouse before marriage; or (b) they reported that they had a love marriage.

Positive and negative dimensions of the marital relationship were measured by five variables: an index of spousal communication (general), an index of spousal communication (reproductive matters), an index of spousal interaction, a dichotomous variable indicating whether young women ever experienced physical violence at the hands of their husband and a dichotomous variable indicating whether young women ever experienced sexual violence perpetrated by their husband. The index of spousal communication (general) was created, based on young women's responses to questions related to whether young women usually discussed such topics as how to spend money and in-laws with their spouse. The index of spousal communication (reproductive matters) considered young women's responses to questions related to whether they had ever discussed such matters as when/whether to have children, number of children to have and contraceptive use. Likewise, the index of spousal interaction was created, based on young women's responses to questions related to whether young women went out with their spouse to watch a film, other places of entertainment and women's natal home in the six months preceding the survey. For all three indexes, normalized scores obtained from factor analysis were used in the multi-variate analysis.

Young women's agency and gender role attitudes were captured by three variables: an index of decision-making, an index of self-efficacy and a dichotomous variable assigned to equal 1 if young women believed that wife beating was not justified in any of a range of circumstances and 0 if they believed that it was justified in even one circumstance (for example, if she were disrespectful of her husband, if she refused sex, if she neglected housework and so on). The index of decision-making considered young women's responses to questions related to their role in

decisions related to choice of friends, purchasing clothes and spending money. The index of self-efficacy was created based on young women's responses to questions related to their ability to express their opinion to elders, and their ability to confront a person who says or does something wrong. For both these indexes, normalised score obtained from factor analysis was used in the multi-variate analysis.

Three indicators, namely, percent aware of any contraceptive method before marriage, percent reporting in-depth knowledge of at least one contraceptive method and percent reporting comprehensive awareness of HIV/AIDS, were used to measure young women's sexual and reproductive health knowledge. In order to assess the extent to which young women had in-depth knowledge of contraceptive methods, the study inquired whether respondents were aware of the frequency with which oral contraceptives must be consumed (daily or weekly); the number of sex acts for which one condom could be used (one); the number of hours following sex that emergency contraceptive pills could be consumed (72 hours); where the IUD is placed (uterus); and when a man practising withdrawal should pull out of a woman (prior to ejaculation). Comprehensive awareness of HIV/AIDS is defined as knowledge of two ways of preventing HIV (specifically, condom use and single partner relations), rejection of common misconceptions about HIV transmission (namely, that HIV can be transmitted through mosquito bites, sharing food or hugging) and awareness that one cannot tell by looking at a person whether he or she has HIV.

Contraceptive and pregnancy-related experiences were captured by three indicators, namely, use of contraceptives to delay the first pregnancy, institutional delivery for the first birth and experience of at least one pregnancy loss.

In order to assess whether age at marriage is indeed associated with the variables described above, we controlled for a number of background variables in the multivariate analyses. These included years of schooling completed, work status before marriage, current work status (defined as ever worked in the twelve months preceding the survey), place of residence and household economic status. Household economic status was measured by a wealth index, composed of household asset data on ownership of selected durable goods, including means of transportation, as well as a number of amenities. The wealth index was constructed by allocating appropriate scores to a household's reported assets or amenities and the value of the index ranged from 0 to 54. Also included among background variables were peer connectedness before marriage (measured by a dichotomous variable indicating whether young women would confide in a peer on at least one of the following topics – taking a job, problems with friends, worries about menstrual problem and boy-girl relationship), civic and social participation (measured by a dichotomous variable indicating whether young women participated in community-led activities in the last 12 months or reported membership in any organised group), spousal age difference, extent of spousal interaction (measured by the index of spousal interaction) and extent of spousal communication on reproductive matters (measured by the index of spousal communication-reproductive matters). Finally, to account for socio-economic and cultural differences among study states described earlier, a variable indicating the state of residence was also included in the multi-variate analyses. Depending on the indicator, we controlled for a different set of background variables in the multivariate analyses.

Analysis

For all the indicators described above, we compared the situation of young women (ages 20-24) married at ages below 18 years (legal age at marriage for females in India) with those married at 18 years or above. Multivariate linear analysis or logistic regression analysis were used, as

appropriate, to ascertain the independent effect of age at marriage on each of these indicators, after controlling for differences in the background characteristics of those married early and late.

Results

Of married young women aged 20-24, two-thirds were married before the age of 18, the minimum legal age at marriage for girls in India. Data on selected characteristics of married young women aged 20-24 presented in Table 1 indicate significant differences between young women who were married before age 18 and those married at 18 years or above. Those who were married early (before age 18) were less educated than those who married late (at 18 years or above); while over half of women who married before age 18 had never attended school, those married at 18 years or above had completed, on average, 9 years of schooling. Conversely, those young women who married early were somewhat more likely than other women to have worked before marriage, and considerably more likely to be working at the time of interview, reside in rural areas, to belong to economically poorer households and to live in nuclear families. Young women married early were more likely to have married relatively older men. Moreover, they were less likely to report peers as confidante on personal matters and about as likely to have participated in civic and social activities.

Table 1: Selected characteristics of married young women aged 20-24, according to whether they were married below 18 years or later

Characteristic	Married < 18 years (N=5,277)	Married at ≥ 18 years (N=3037)
Individual characteristics		
Mean age (years)	22.0	22.0
Median years of schooling completed	NC	9.0
% worked before marriage [#]	31.0	27.0
% worked in the last 12 months [#]	52.2	30.0
% reported peers as confidante on personal matters (before marriage) [#]	36.0	53.0
Participated in civic and social activities	21.2	21.0
Mean spousal age difference (years) [#]	9.4	7.0
Household characteristics		
% residing in rural areas [#]	85.0	63.0
Mean score, household wealth index [#]	14.0	20.0
% living in nuclear family [#]	43.0	26.0

[#] p<.001. NC: Not calculated, as more than 50% had no formal education

Young women's involvement in marriage related planning and nature of marital relationship

Findings indicate that, compared to young women who married late, young women married early were less likely to have been consulted on the timing of marriage or choice of spouse. Moreover, they were less likely to have received opportunities to develop an acquaintance with their spouse before marriage or had a love marriage (see Table 2). For example, only 10% of young women who married early, compared to 27% of those married late, reported that their parents had asked them about their preferred age at marriage. Likewise, fewer than two-fifths of young women married early compared to about two-thirds of young women married late reported that their parents had sought their approval of the spouse chosen for them. While opportunities for meeting or talking to the spouse-to-be before marriage were limited for all young women, such opportunities were far more limited for those married early. Just 8% of young women married early compared to 21% of those married late reported that they had ever had a chance to meet and interact with their spouse-to-be alone prior to marriage. Similarly, while only a handful of young

women reported a love marriage, those married early were less likely than those married late to report so (3% versus 6%). Differences were statistically significant with regard to each indicator.

Early marriage also affects the nature of the marital relationship. In general, young women married early were somewhat less likely to report ever discussing a range of issues with their husband. Findings, moreover, show that young women married early were considerably less likely than those married late to report close interaction with their husbands. For example, just 17% of young women married early compared to 31% of young women married late reported that they had gone out with their spouse to watch a film in the six months preceding the survey. Similar differences were apparent with regard to visiting other places of entertainment and young women's natal home.

Experience of violence within marriage was also more common among those married early. For example, 32% of those who married early compared to 17% of those who married late reported having ever experienced physical violence perpetrated by their husband. Similar differences were evident with respect to experiences of sexual violence within marriage: 37% of those who married early compared to 22% of those who married late reported having experienced sexual violence perpetrated by their husband.

Table 2: Young women's involvement in marriage related planning and nature of marital relationship, according to whether they were married below 18 years or later

Characteristic	Married < 18 years (N=5277)	Married at ≥ 18 years (N=3037)
<i>Involvement in marriage related planning</i>		
Parents sought young women's opinion about when to get married [#]	10.4	27.3
Parents sought young women's approval of spouse chosen [#]	37.3	64.0
Ever had a chance to meet/talk to spouse before marriage [#]	8.0	21.0
Had a love marriage [#]	3.1	6.3
<i>Nature of marital relationship</i>		
Usually discussed how to spend money	90.2	89.2
Usually discussed in-law's issues [#]	77.4	82.0
Ever discussed when/whether to have baby [#]	85.0	88.0
Ever discussed number of children to have [#]	87.0	89.1
Ever discussed contraceptive use*	57.0	60.0
Gone out with spouse to watch a film in the last six months [#]	17.3	31.4
Visited with spouse other places of entertainment in the last six months [#]	28.0	43.0
Visited with spouse young women's natal home in the last six months [#]	68.0	77.1
Ever experienced physical violence perpetrated by spouse [#]	32.0	17.0
Ever experienced sexual violence perpetrated by spouse [#]	37.0	22.2

* p≤.01; [#] p≤.001

Young women's agency and gender role attitudes

Findings show that early marriage significantly compromises young women's decision-making capacity and sense of self-confidence. Young women married early were less likely to have made decisions independently on personal matters than those married late; for example, 31% of women married early decided independently on purchasing clothes for themselves compared to 42% of those who married late (Table 3). Likewise, women married early were significantly less likely to take independent decisions on spending money (46% versus 55%). Moreover, they were somewhat less likely to express confidence in expressing their opinion to elders (25% versus 33%) or confronting a person who said or did something wrong to them (31% versus 35%). Young women marrying early were also more likely to hold gender inequalitarian attitudes,

including, for example, with regard to the justifiability of wife-beating; only 36% of the young women who married early compared to 47% of those married late believed that wife beating is not justified in any circumstance.

Table 3: Young women’s agency and gender role attitudes, according to whether they were married below 18 years or later

Characteristic	Married < 18 years (N=5277)	Married at ≥ 18 years (N=3037)
<i>Young women’s agency and gender role attitudes</i>		
Made decisions independently on choice of friends*	90.0	91.4
Made decisions independently on purchasing clothes [#]	31.0	42.0
Made decisions independently on spending money [#]	46.0	55.3
Reported ability to express own opinion to elders [#]	25.0	33.0
Reported ability to confront a person who said or did something wrong to them [#]	31.0	35.4
Believed that wife beating is not justified in any circumstance [#]	36.0	47.0

* p≤.01; [#] p≤.001

Young women’s sexual and reproductive health knowledge and contraception and pregnancy-related experiences

Findings also show that young women married early were more likely than those married late to enter marriage uninformed about sexual and reproductive matters. For example, only 18% of those married early compared to 36% of those married late reported that they were aware of any contraceptive methods before marriage. Moreover, young women married early continued to be less informed about sexual and reproductive health matters even at the time of interview. For example, 61% of those married early compared to 70% of those married late reported in-depth knowledge of at least one contraceptive method. Likewise, only 17% of those married early compared to 39% of those married late reported comprehensive awareness of HIV/AIDS at the time of survey.

Early marriage also adversely affects young women's contraceptive and pregnancy related experiences in several ways. For example, use of contraceptives to delay the first pregnancy (3% versus 11%) and institutional delivery of the first birth (45% versus 70%) were far less prevalent among those who married early than those who married late. Further, young women married early were more likely to experience adverse reproductive outcomes compared to those married late. For example, 18% of those married early compared to 11% of those married late reported having experienced at least one pregnancy loss.

Table 4: Young women’s sexual and reproductive health knowledge and contraceptive and pregnancy-related experiences, according to whether they were married below 18 years or later

Characteristic	Married < 18 years (N=5277)	Married at ≥ 18 years (N=3037)
<i>Sexual and reproductive health knowledge</i>		
Aware of any contraceptive method before marriage [#]	18.0	36.0
Reported in-depth knowledge of at least one contraceptive method [#]	61.4	70.1
Reported comprehensive awareness of HIV/AIDS [#]	17.0	39.2
<i>Contraceptive and pregnancy-related experiences</i>		
Used contraceptives to delay the first pregnancy [#]	3.4	11.3
Had institutional delivery for the first birth [#]	45.0	70.0
Experienced at least one pregnancy loss [#]	18.1	11.2

[#] p≤.001

Effects of delayed marriage: Results of multivariate analyses

Table 5 presents findings from a series of multi-variate analyses that explore the associations between marriage age and each of the indicators discussed thus far, controlling for a range of background factors. As evident from the table, most of the associations, described above remained significant even after controlling for the possible influences of the individual’s educational level, work status, place of residence, household economic status, spousal age difference, extent of spousal interaction, maternal education and state of residence.

As far as influences on the marriage process and the marital relationship are concerned, for example, young women who married late were significantly more likely to have been involved in marriage-related planning than those married early (odds ratio 1.94). They were also significantly more likely to report close spousal interaction (coefficient 0.19). Conversely, women who married late were only half as likely to have experienced physical violence (odds ratio 0.56) and two-thirds as likely to have experienced sexual violence (odds ratio 0.68) within marriage as those who married early. In contrast, associations observed between early marriage and extent of spousal communication on both general and reproductive matters did not remain significant when controlled for other possible influences.

Marriage timing was significantly correlated with indicators of agency and gender role attitudes as well. A positive association between young women's decision-making ability and delayed marriage, even after controlling for other possible influences, was evident; a mild positive association was observed between their self-efficacy and delayed marriage. Findings also show that young women married late were significantly more likely to believe that wife-beating is not justified in any circumstance (odds ratio 1.34).

Findings suggest a positive association between young women's sexual and reproductive health knowledge and the timing of marriage. Young women married late were significantly more likely than those who married early to have comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS (odds ratio 1.58); however, they were only mildly more likely to have in-depth awareness of contraceptive methods.

Pregnancy-related indicators were also significantly influenced by marriage age. Findings show that young women married late were twice as likely as those married early to have used contraceptive methods to delay the first pregnancy (odd ratio 1.91). Moreover, they were more likely to have their first delivery in a health facility than those who married early when controlled

for other possible influences (odds ratio 1.64). Finally, they were significantly less likely to have experienced pregnancy loss as those married early (odds ratio 0.60).

Table 5: Effects of delayed marriage: Results of multivariate analyses

Characteristic	Co-efficient	Odds ratio
Involvement in marriage related- planning ¹		1.94 [#]
Index of spousal communication- general ²	0.07 ⁺	
Index of spousal communication-reproductive matters ²	0.04	
Index of spousal interaction ²	0.19 [#]	
Experience of physical violence within marriage ³		0.56 [#]
Experience of sexual violence within marriage ³		0.68 [#]
Index of decision making ⁴	0.03 [#]	
Index of self-efficacy ⁴	0.01 [*]	
Non-acceptance of wife-beating ⁴		1.34 [#]
In-depth awareness of at least one contraceptive method ⁵		1.11
Comprehensive awareness of HIV/AIDS ⁵		1.58 [#]
Institutional delivery for the first birth ⁶		1.64 [#]
Experience of any pregnancy loss ⁷		0.61 [#]
Use of contraception to delay the first pregnancy ⁶		1.91 [#]

⁺ p<.05; ^{*} p<.01; [#] p<.001

Note: ¹ After controlling for years of schooling completed, place of residence, work status before marriage, peer connectedness before marriage, mother's education and state of residence

² After controlling for years of schooling completed, place of residence, current work status, household economic status, spousal age difference and state of residence

³ After controlling for year of schooling completed, place of residence, current work status, household economic status, spousal age difference, spousal interaction and state of residence

⁴ After controlling for year of schooling completed, place of residence, current work status, household economic status, spousal age difference, spousal interaction, social participation and state of residence

⁵ After controlling for year of schooling completed, place of residence, current work status, household economic status, spousal communication in reproductive matters and state of residence

⁶ After controlling for year of schooling completed, place of residence, current work status, household economic status, spousal interaction and state of residence

⁷ After controlling for year of schooling completed, place of residence, current work status, household economic status, experience of physical violence and state of residence

Discussion

Findings underscore that early marriage compromises young women's lives and reproductive health and choices in multiple ways. It inhibits young women's involvement in marriage related planning and their decision-making autonomy. As observed by other studies in India (ICRW, 2005; Ram et. al. 2008), early marriage places young women at risk of physical and sexual violence within marriage. It hinders them from adopting gender egalitarian attitudes, for example with regard to the justifiability of wife-beating, a finding also observed in other settings (ICRW, 2005; Jensen and Thornton, 2003; Khan et al., 2002; Joshi et al., 2001; Ouattara et al., 1998; Puri et al., 2003). Moreover, women married early were more likely to be poorly informed about sexual and reproductive matters. Finally, women married early were less likely to have used contraceptives to delay the first pregnancy and experienced institutional delivery and more likely to have experienced pregnancy loss.

These findings make a compelling statement for raising age at marriage and should be used to advocate among a wide range of stakeholders the rationale for ensuring that girls' marriages are delayed. These findings – particularly those relating to spousal closeness, absence of violence and positive pregnancy related outcomes – that result from delaying marriage – lend themselves to actions intended to build community support for delayed marriage among both youth themselves as well as their families; ensure a greater commitment on the part of law enforcement agencies to enforce existing laws on the minimum age at marriage and the registration of marriages; and at the same time, ensure the greater involvement of school, health and other authorities to support young women in negotiating with their parents to delay marriage.

The findings of this study may be particularly compelling for parents. Parents must be apprised of the need to involve children in marriage-related decisions and enable them to interact with their prospective spouses prior to the wedding day. Parents must also be made aware of the fact that early marriage compromises young women's lives and reproductive health and choices in multiple ways.

The reality that notwithstanding programme efforts, early marriage will continue to characterize the lives of large proportions of young women in India underscores the need for programmes that support newly-wed young women, acknowledging that their situation and needs may differ from those of married adults. Efforts are needed that attempt to redress the multiple vulnerabilities faced by young women who marry early, for example, that address their health and empowerment needs, enable them to have greater control over resources, break down their social isolation and encourage couple communication, negotiation and conflict management skills early in marriage. There exist intervention models in India that have attempted to address these needs; these should be reviewed and up-scaled as appropriate so that married young women have the opportunity to exercise control over their lives.

Encouraging signs are evident. Policies and programmes – be they related to women and child development, youth and health and family welfare – have all recognized the importance of preventing early marriage and improving sexual and reproductive health and choice among young people, including married young women. Our findings offer empirical evidence to inform the content of these programmes. What is needed now is ensuring that programmes do indeed reach young people and the influential adults in their lives, and that promising lessons are assimilated and scaled up.

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