

Background

Marriage is a ritual that brings significant changes to the lives of many young women especially in rural India. It also marks the new familial changes which a young woman undergoes after the marriage and for which they are not fully equipped. In spite of the fact that the minimum legal age at marriage for girls is 18 years, is not being implemented uniformly everywhere. The various aspects of marital union together with young women's attitude towards marriage, their adjustment mechanism in marital place (most of the families are joint families especially in rural areas), their worry, stress and level of conjugal happiness are highlighted in the present paper. The study was supported by Parks Small Grant, U.K.

Objective of the Study

The overall objective of the study is to find out the various aspects of marital union among the young married women in rural India. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To assess the perception of young women regarding ideal age at marriage for girls
2. To assess the type of marriage, decision-making regarding marriage and the initial experience after moving into the marital home
3. To assess the problems faced by young women and also to highlight the coping strategy for the same
4. To examine level of happiness in their conjugal life

Sampling Design

The study was designed to a sample size of 654 married women in the age group 13-24 years. The study was conducted in rural West Bengal, the eastern state of India. The state had been divided into several blocks on the basis of their development indicators for example proportion of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population and distance from the district headquarter, that is, from Calcutta. In the next step villages were stratified on the basis of female literacy and were selected on the basis of systematic random sampling. Twelve villages were selected for the present study.

Methodology

The study included both the quantitative as well as qualitative techniques. The quantitative tool includes the questionnaire survey and the qualitative technique included Focus Group Discussions and In-depth Interviews. The Focus Group Discussions were conducted to get an idea of issues regarding the marital union and In-depth Interviews to complement the quantitative findings.

Findings from the Study

The study shows that young women whose mean age at marriage was 14.9 perceived less than 18 years as the ideal age at marriage for girls. As the mean age of women increased, the perception regarding ideal age at marriage also increased and was found to be statistically significant. Around 48 percent of women who considered ideal age at marriage is less than 18 years, felt girls attain mental maturity at this age. An equal percentage of women considered the same reason for ideal age at marriage at 18 years and above. Around 76 percent women in both the groups felt physical maturity is the reason for the ideal age at marriage. It is to be noted that almost nine percent women who felt ideal age at marriage is 18 years and above did not know the reason for considering the age as ideal and many had heard from other persons that it is the ideal age at marriage.

The proportion of girls getting married below age 18 was found to be 74 percent in the community and only 26 percent were married off at age 18 or above. More than 12 percent women got married at age 14 and more than 21 percent got married at age 15. Considering to the husband's age at marriage, it was found that almost 29 percent got married before they reached 21 year of age. Therefore, age at marriage was found to be low for both the girls and boys in the community.

Then the women were asked about the type of their marriage, perception regarding own marriage, familiarity with husband at the time of marriage, selection criteria for husband, person involved in the selection of husband, expression of opinion regarding marriage, mental preparation for marriage and the initial feeling after moving into the marital place. Not much difference was observed for love marriage among two groups of women, i.e. who got married below age 18 and those who got married at age 18 or more. More than 90 percent of women who got married below age 18 perceived that their marriage was early compared to 30 percent who got married at age 18 or more. Almost 30 percent of women whose marriage were arranged below age 18 did not meet their husband before getting married and the percentage

was 17 for those women who got married at age 18 or more. The findings were statistically significant. Almost 26 percent women reported that they themselves had selected their life partner and for other 70 percent, the groom was selected by parents. A little more than 4 percent reported that 'other' persons selected their husbands. This 'other' category includes brother, sister, uncle, neighbour and some other acquaintances. When women were asked about the selection criteria for their husband, more than 27 percent reported that husband was selected for his good job or good earning in the sense that he can support his family after marriage. After the selection criteria for marriage, women were asked about their decision-making practice for their own marriage. Majority of the women reported that discussion regarding marriage was held at their house prior to their marriage. Since most of the marriages were arranged by their parents, young women had little say regarding the choice of life partner. Objection in marriage for making it earlier than expected and expression of opinion regarding own marriage were found to increase with women's education upto secondary level and above, being Hindu and exposure to media.

The women were then asked about their mental preparation before getting married. Almost half of the respondents reported that they were not prepared mentally before getting married. Regarding young women's experience of moving into the marital home, more than half of the respondents reported being happy and comfortable in the initial days of marriage. At the same time, more than one-fourth women felt lonely just after their marriage, more than 10 percent were frightened and more than 14 percent were unhappy, uncomfortable and did not like the transition due to problem in adjustment with in-laws, husband, and uncomfortable sex. More than four percent women reported they felt restless, worried, excited, indifferent, and immature to understand the changes. The mental preparation for marriage was found to be more among older women of 18 years or more compared to their younger counterpart of less than 18 years, Hindu women compared to their non-Hindu counterpart, general caste women and women who belonged to other backward class compared to their scheduled caste and scheduled tribe counterpart, women with middle-school or secondary level of education or more compared to their illiterate counterpart, women who were exposed to media and who came from high economic status. The results were found to be statistically significant.

More than one-third women faced some problem after reaching their marital home. Almost 43 percent women reported that the problem was due to big family size and not knowing the household chores. More than 20 percent reported in-laws did not like her since respondent was not good-looking, love marriage not accepted by in-laws, mother-in-law shouts without reason, and not happy with the respondent. Almost 14 percent reported that they had to face trouble at

marital home due to monetary problem, low caste, health problems, conservative family, no earning after marriage, and collect drinking water from far-off place. Seventeen statements were asked to young women in order to get an idea about their coping strategy after facing problems. The coping strategies were divided into 4 categories, namely, emotional diffusing, cognitive appraisal, seeking help and withdrawal. Emotional diffusing was found to be much higher among women who got married below age 18. Almost 60 percent said to have discuss their problems with their husbands whereas more than one-fifth women did not share their problem with anybody. Almost 17 percent women reported to have current problem in adjustment at the time of the survey.

Then the young women were asked about their level of satisfaction in conjugal life as compared to other women in the community. More than 60 percent reported to be more satisfied about their relationship with husband and it dropped to 40 percent when they were asked about their relationship with in-laws. In spite of all the problems faced initially after moving into the marital home, almost three-fourth of the young women felt that if they had their life to live over, they would have married the same person they got married and a little less than one-fifth felt they would have married a different person. Almost half of the respondent addressed their marriage as happy, 37 percent said it is average and 12 percent said their marriage is a disappointment. Those women who had reported unhappy marriage were further asked the probable reason for this. Majority reported that husband doubts her, husband's second marriage and has another wife, he takes alcohol, beats her, not caring, husband does not earn, spousal misunderstanding, and husband forces for sex. Other reported that in-laws don't like, MIL quarrels, shouts. The happy marriage was found to be more among women with exposure to media, husband's education upto secondary level and above, whose age at marriage is high and who were coming from well-off households. The difference with husband regarding dealing with some basic conjugal issues was enquired for the study and it was found that more than one-fifth women had much difference with husband handling finance and having sex.