At the crossroads between education and marriage: how parental expectations, community pressure and girls' aspirations influence decision-making on adolescent girls' futures in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

In South Asia, early marriage is often cited as a reason for why adolescent girls' education is truncated. Parents' decisions on choosing one or the other are heavily influenced by socio-cultural norms and practices; these form the backdrop against which they control and restrict various aspects of their daughters' lives in order to maintain family honor, protect girls' reputations, prepare them for future roles, and ensure their suitable marriage. At the same time adolescent girls develop their own dreams and aspirations, framed by information and experiences they are exposed to, how they are socialized, and their parents' expectations of them. This analysis is from a three-site qualitative study in, Rajasthan and Maharashtra in India, and Bangladesh (Matlab and Mirzapur). Qualitative methods were used to collect data, including across sites: 61 in-depth interviews with unmarried adolescent girls; 13, 15, and 12 focus groups with unmarried adolescent girls, mothers of adolescent girls, and fathers of adolescent girls, respectively; narrative scenarios with girls, their mothers and their fathers; and key informant interviews. The data were coded using Atlas/ti, and analyzed by identifying patterns and variation in the data. Girls' ages ranged from 14 to 20.

Findings confirm that there is a trade-off between marriage and education – a decision about one directly affects the other. Thus when parents choose to marry their daughters early, they have also chosen to end their education, while a decision to invest in further education of a girl is weighed against the social and economic costs of delaying her marriage. Yet parents differ in how they socialize and care for girls, and the decisions they make about their future. Parental decision-making on education versus marriage is influenced by socio-economic status, including lower dowry for a younger bride; societal expectations; whether a good marriage proposal has been offered and the costs and consequences of turning it down; characteristics and experiences that affect how a family values education for girls, such as parents' own level of education and exposure to educated female role models; the availability of nearby and safe education and employment opportunities for girls; and how able girls are to communicate and negotiate with parents about their aspirations.

Examining how parents differ in arriving at decisions regarding education and marriage for their daughters, can help programs identify and tailor opportunities to influence decisions made about adolescent girls. Learning more about how parents value girls can suggest ways in which to shift norms and expectations around girls within communities.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time of transition from childhood to adulthood, with the onset of puberty producing transformative physical changes at the same time that social norms impose new roles and responsibilities. These changes are particularly acute for adolescent girls in South Asia, where, with the onset of puberty, a girl's action are tied to her family's honor, or *izzat*. Social norms dictate that the family must curb a daughter's actions in order to maintain izzat in the community. Thus, from the relative freedoms experienced in childhood, menarche signals the start of countless restrictions imposed by parents on every aspect of an adolescent girl's life, including her behavior, dress, social networks, mobility, activities and future opportunities. Parents socialize a girl by severely restricting her experiences in part to protect her physical chastity from sexual harassment, rape and premarital sex, but also to protect her perceived chastity from community gossip. Because a girl's behavior reflects on her family's honor in the community, parental restrictions also protect the reputation of the girl's family. Most importantly, restrictions help parents raise "good" or "ideal" daughters that are more likely to marry well, and are thus an investment in a girl's future well-being.

With securing a good marriage as the primary responsibility of South Asian parents to their daughters, parental duty to ensure marriagability sets the parameters of how a girl is socialized. It also strongly influences the age at which she is married and the level of education she receives, depending on the age and education level perceived as most desirable to prospective suitors. At the same time, marriage and education are rarely synonymous in South Asia: a girl's education usually ends when she is married, so that choosing one path necessarily means foregoing the other.

Yet the findings from this research will show that parents in South Asia differ in how they socialize their daughters, with some parents providing very limited opportunities and experiences for girls, others bucking social norms to give their daughters new opportunities, and many parents ranging between these relative extremes. Thus parents differ in deciding when to get girls married and how long to continue their education, and are influenced by a number of factors in making these decisions, including community pressure, poverty, the protection of girls, parents' own educational levels, local employment opportunities for girls, and any marriage offers received for a girl. While parents are increasingly supporting the education of girls, many parents are doing so only up to a certain grade level, though a growing minority are allowing girls to pursue higher education and careers.

At the same time that parents are weighing a range of factors in making decisions about their daughters, adolescent girls have their own aspirations, developed in response to socialization by their parents, community, friends and media; as well as to changing experiences and looming decisions about their future. These aspirations sometimes meld with and sometimes counter the limitations placed on them by parents, and girls to varying extents are able to negotiate for opportunities such as delaying marriage, continuing education or earning income.

BACKGROUND

Nearly a quarter of the world's 1.2 billion adolescents – 282 million – live in South Asia[i]. They make up over one-fifth of the region's population, with the greatest proportions in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and the greatest absolute number in India.[ii] Girls represent nearly half of these adolescents.

Despite their numbers, adolescent girls in South Asia are on the receiving end of strict social norms that make them nearly invisible in society. They are doubly disadvantaged because of their position: as females they are excluded from decision-making, control over resources and control over their own mobility;[iii] [iv] at the same time they are tasked with new roles and responsibilities as a result of their age and entry into puberty.[v] This twofold burden has left adolescent girls behind with respect to education, employment, health and their ability to influence decisions about their own lives, such as marriage. Few services accommodate their specific needs for information, educational and economic opportunities, basic and reproductive health care, and nutrition.

Further, girls are perceived to be an economic burden, as parents are required to pay dowry for each daughter; sons, on the other hand, support their parents financially throughout their lives, and are thus valued economically.[vi] This makes the cost of having a daughter high, providing little motivation for investment in alternatives for girls.[vii] Parents also worry about marrying their daughters. Some studies say this may be because parents believe it is their social or religious duty to marry girls early, or that delaying marriage would decrease a girl's chances of finding a suitable partner.[viii] As a result, education is often truncated in favor of marriage. But there is limited research on the pressures and challenges families face in arriving at the decision of marrying or educating daughters during their adolescent years. Little is known about how social expectations and community pressure, as well as other factors such as poverty and gender discrimination influences parents' decisions.

While throughout the developing world, including South Asia, the age of marriage is slowing rising, child marriage, or marriage before the age of 18, remains highly prevalent throughout the region. A UNICEF study found that over 48 percent of women between 15 and 24 years were married while still children in South Asia, though other studies indicate that this rate is as high as two-thirds of girls in most South Asian countries, with one-fourth married by age 15 (UNICEF, 2005; Singh 2003). In addition, data from demographic health surveys for India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, indicate that the prevalence in the region ranges from 30-50%, and the rate of change over time is variable across the three countries. The rate of decline is fastest for Nepal (1.2 percentage points per year), followed by India (0.9 percentage points per year), and slowest for Bangladesh (0.2 percentage points per year).

Young age at marriage leads to several adverse consequences in health and development more broadly. Adolescent girls are robbed of their right to childhood and child rights, and they are unable to fulfill their optimum potential in terms of education, employment, health and childbearing. Early marriage risks include early childbearing, lower levels of empowerment, an increased risk of exposure to domestic violence, and fewer opportunities for education and employment.[ix] While boys generally cite economic reasons for leaving school, and those from poor families usually marry later so they can become financially independent before marriage,[x]

adolescent girls often leave school because of early marriage, which relieves economic and social burdens faced by parents, and because household responsibilities in the marital home are expected to take priority over education.[xi] However there is little research on girls' views on these decisions and how much girls are able to influence decisions to meet their own aspirations.

Early marriage carries significant adverse and long-term health consequences. Young age at marriage is associated with higher fertility, and maternal, infant and child mortality. South Asian societies place enormous pressure on young women to prove their fertility, particularly to produce sons. Bearing children is critical to social acceptance for newly married women[xii xiii]. Studies on newly married adolescents find that they have limited social space and support and few opportunities to negotiate a delay in a first pregnancy. Families and in many cases spouses are more open to a married adolescent girl delaying the birth of a second child, but not the birth of a first child. Hence a majority of newly married adolescents conceive within the first year of marriage, indicative of the tremendous expectations placed on a newly married adolescent girl.[xiv] The risk for maternal mortality is two-fold higher for girls younger than 18 years and five-fold higher for girls younger than 15 years. It increases the likelihood of maternal morbidity over the long term due to obstetric fistula and other complications, and also carries adverse consequences for poor nutrition and health outcomes in children of young brides.

In South Asian societies, the onset of menarche transforms how girls are valued by their families and communities. Chastity before marriage is given higher priority than almost any other aspect in how adolescent girls are valued. This has significant repercussions for their autonomy, mobility, education, employment and the timing of their marriage. Some parents say they marry girls early because they fear their daughters will be raped, become pregnant or elope.[xv] Premarital sex, even resulting from rape, can dishonor the entire family in the eyes of society.[xvi] Girls may also have a "love marriage," which can hurt the reputation of both the girl and her family.[xvii] One study of adolescent focus group discussions in Nepal found that premarital sex is overlooked among boys but will ruin girls.[xviii] In fact, even the hint of a friendship with a boy can destroy a girl's reputation, marriage prospects and her family's status in the community.[xix] In Nepal, often girls who become pregnant before marriage are forced to marry the boy who fathered the pregnancy. In South Asia, this sometimes occurs even in cases of rape. If the man who rapes a girl refuses to marry her, the girl's life is considered ruined, though the situation may be handled by paying an older man or widower to marry her.[xx]

At the same time that girls are valued for their virginity, adolescent boys face different social norms. Early sexual activity is not only condoned with boys, but may even be valued or encouraged in society.[xxi] The pressure to become financially secure in order to marry requires that boys postpone marriage, increasing the likelihood that they will engage in unsafe sexual activity.[xxii] Thus 20 to 30 percent of young men in South Asia report engaging in premarital sex, while 0 to 10 percent of young women report the same.[xxiii xxiv] These numbers reflect the larger cultural values that encourage sexuality in men but restrict it for women.

Though attitudes on early marriage are changing as parents see the benefits of education and employment, as well as the negative consequences of early childbearing, parents who wait too long to marry their daughters face enormous social pressure and loss of honor.[xxv] Thus, parents'

expectations are both an investment in their own status in society and in the futures of their daughters. Parents maintain their honor in society by ensuring that their expectations – that girls remain chaste and marry at a suitable age – are met by placing restrictions on adolescent girls. In Pakistan, as in most of South Asia, boys gain mobility, autonomy, power and opportunity with entry into adolescence, while girls are systematically deprived of independence.[xxvi]Thus while entry into puberty for boys involves enjoying new privileges along with responsibilities, for girls it generally entails strict restrictions.[xxvii]

Parent's concerns for the family's honor and the girl's reputation as a result of her perceived chastity shape the daily behaviors and experiences of adolescent girls. Parents closely supervise girls to ensure they maintain their "character" by limiting girls' mobility, or interactions outside of the family or community, particularly with males. Some girls report limited or no movement outside of their home, or movement outside of home with certain family members only. Other girls have more freedom within the community, but not outside of it. Regardless of level of mobility, however, girls caught talking to boys in public are criticized by parents and the community, and sometimes punished by parents.[xxviii] Such behavior is unchaste and can harm a girl's reputation. When boys and girls are caught together, the girl is blamed[xxix] because she, not the boy, is expected to guard her chastity. Secluding or isolating girls from the onset of menarche is common in South Asia, ensuring their reputation remains unblemished but leaving girls without access to information and experiences outside their immediate environment.[xxx]

Girls have no say in marital decision making in South Asia, though more educated parents may ask the girl for her opinion.[xxxi] When asked, adolescent girls say that boys and girls should get married at a later age than they currently do.[xxxii] Adolescents appear to recognize the double standard in their parent's expectations from boys versus girls.[xxxiii] Overall, most adolescents in South Asia, similar to their parents, have conservative views about marriage and sex, including disapproval of premarital sex, love marriages and social interaction between unrelated men and women.[xxxiv xxxv]

Though adolescent girls in South Asia have more educational opportunities today than in the past, with the highest literacy and school enrollment rates in decades, many girls and entire communities are missed by this progress, particularly in rural areas. Illiteracy and low secondary school enrollments are still widespread problems.[xxxvi] One-third to two-thirds of younger adolescent girls are illiterate, compared to one-fifth to one-half of younger adolescent boys.[xxxvii] In Bangladesh and Pakistan, secondary school enrollment is almost double for boys than for girls,[xxxviii] while the dropout rate for high school girls is 72 percent in India.[xxxix] Girls leave school for reasons specific to their age and sex, including marriage and the high opportunity cost of educating a girl. Fifty-seven percent of girls in Nepal reported marriage or pregnancy as the reason they left school.[xl xli] In a study of focus group discussions in Nepal, adolescents reported that decisions about school were based on gender inequalities: parents were more likely to educate boys than girls because the latter were expected to help with domestic chores and to care for younger siblings at home.[xlii] More research is needed to understand how parents weigh various factors that influence their decisions about educating boys and girl.

Many girls and some parents throughout South Asia recognize or are beginning to recognize the value of educating girls. In Nepal, according to focus group discussions with adolescent girls, respondents reported that in areas where girls traditionally did not go to school, the attitude of parents on educating girls may be changing (Waszak, 2003). Girls themselves in these discussions said they valued education because it could help them become self-sufficient, provide proper care for their families and protect themselves against abuse or mistreatment by husbands.[xliii] Girls who were not receiving an education expressed a longing for school and described how their lives would be better if they had this opportunity.[xliv] Yet more information is needed in the range of girls aspirations and views on education. Some parents too are slowly starting to see the benefits of educating girls, although they still face costs – school fees, risks associated with sending girls to faraway schools, and the loss of economic benefits from lower dowry with earlier marriage – that make investing in a girl's education less attractive. Even when parents can afford school, they often send boys to expensive boarding schools while girls are kept in lower quality local schools.[xlv] Despite these findings, current research provides little insight into how various factors influence their decisions about sending girls to school and why a few parents choose to invest in their daughters' education when their neighbors and friends do not.

The life event of early marriage is a pivotal point in the life-cycle of women and girls in South Asia. Delaying marriage and first births by a few years into early adulthood could alleviate many of these adverse consequences over the long term and facilitate greater educational achievement that in itself carry a range of significant (and established) benefits for development. But in order to identify opportunities to work with girls, parents and communities to change this entrenched social practice, a deeper understanding of the evolving and dynamic processes around early marriage is an important first step. This paper explores the trade-off between education and marriage, and how parental expectations, community pressure, and girls' aspirations influence decision-making with regard to marriage and education.

The study context

Three study sites were selected for this qualitative study, namely Bangladesh, and Maharashtra and Rajasthan in India. The overarching objective for this study was to understand how and why gender bias perpetuates poor health and nutrition outcomes, from a life-cycle perspective. All the three sites were selected because early marriage was widely prevalent in each setting and this carries adverse consequences for maternal and child health and nutrition later in girls' lives.

In Bangladesh, 47% of girls are married by age 19, and 33% are pregnant or have their first child by this age. The prevalence of low birth weight affects one in two births (50%). Discrepancies in equal access to education are also evident, with 26.5 percent of females having no schooling compared with 15 percent of males.[xlvi] Studies have shown, however, that these biases are not universal, and that parents in fact vary in their expectations of girls and the limitations they place on them.

In Maharashtra, 39% of girls are married by age 19, and over 200,000 adolescent girls become mothers every year.[xlvii] It is estimated that 26 percent of the fertility rate comes from births to

adolescent girls aged 15 to 19. In urban areas, this rate drops to 21 percent but in rural areas it rises to 29 percent of the total fertility rate.[xlviii]

Rajasthan was selected as a study site because early marriage remains widely prevalent in the state. The prevalence of early marriage is 57.1 percent overall and 65.7 percent in rural areas;[xlix] this exceeds many other parts of India because of strong social pressures for the practice. The median age of marriage for girls is 15 years.[l] At the same time, data indicate an obvious gap between sexes in the education sector: in Rajasthan, while 56.6 percent of boys aged 6-14 are in school, only 43.4 percent of girls of the same age are getting an education.[li]

Across the three sites, gender discrimination against girls is seen in practically every aspect of their daily lives, such as the limited level of mobility allowed girls, as well as in overarching cultural practices, including the prominent practice of son preference.

METHODS

Study sites

This study was designed as a three-site qualitative study on nutrition and gender. Each research team identified a study area, each with two study sites; the study partners included three non-governmental organizations, the Foundation for Research in Health Systems (FRHS), the Institute for Health Management Pachod (IHMP), the International Center for Diarrheal Disease Research in Bangladesh (ICDDRB) and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). The three study areas were Rajasthan and Maharashtra in India, and Bangladesh. Table 1 presents the study areas and sites that were included in this study.

Table 1. Study areas and sites

Study Area	Study Sites
Rajasthan	Udaipur district Salumber (rural)
	Udaipur district Bhindar (peri-urban)
Maharashtra	Pune (urban)
	Pachod (rural)
Bangladesh	Mirzapur (rural)
	Matlab (rural)

The three study areas were selected because the prevalence of low birth weight remains high in each of these areas, while the context differed slightly in each case.

Site 1: Rajasthan
FRHS carried out this study in Udaipur district, a less developed district in southern Rajasthan. Two blocks were selected as sub-sites: a rural block (population, 15,862) and a peri-urban block (population, 16,365). The latter had better access to health and other services, the main reason for selecting two distinct blocks. The rural block consisted of several villages inhabited mainly by tribal families, with many of the participants from the Meena tribe.

Site 2: Bangladesh
ICDDRB collected data in two regions of rural Bangladesh: Matlab and Mirzapur. Matlab is a flood-prone region and ICDDR,B has carried out research and provided health services there for more than 30 years. Mirzapur is close to Dhaka and has many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and industries. In both regions, the economy is dominated by subsistence agriculture, with a high level of landlessness and many small-landed farms. However, the economy is more diversified in Mirzapur because of an industrial presence.

Site 3: Maharashtra
IHMP collected data in 6 rural villages in Aurangabad district and 7 slums in urban Pune city. Aurangabad district was selected because the area is drought-prone and socio-economically poor. Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy (49 percent) and about 42 percent of households are in the low economic strata. While 21.8 percent of the population in rural Aurangabad district are adolescents, the area suffers from poor education levels, particularly for females, and has amongst the lowest age at marriage and age at first conception (NFHS-II) in

Maharashtra. While male literacy in the region is at 74 percent, female literacy is at 42 percent. In rural areas of Aurangabad district, the median age at marriage for girls is 14.3 years and girls are 16 years at the time of first child-birth. (IHMP 1998). 90 percent of currently married women in this region were mothers before the age of 19.

Slums in Pune city were selected because they represent low-income areas in an urban setting. Slums have a high level of migration and are characterized by crowding and an inhospitable environment. Pune's slums have a high proportion of adolescents, low levels of education, and a low median age of marriage. With an estimated population of about 30 million (PMC 2005), 43 percent of Pune's population live in slums. 22 percent of the slum population are adolescents. About 18.5 percent of the males (above 7 years) and 39.3 percent of the females (above 7 years) are illiterate. This number jumps to 45 percent for women ages 15 to 45. The median age at marriage for girls is 16 years (IHMP, 1998).

Study design and methods

This study was designed as a three-site qualitative study and was developed through a collaborative process across the study partners. The methodology used in each of the three sites was the same, with a few minor adaptations at each site. An initial workshop was held in May 2004 in which the three research teams and ICRW staff developed the study design. A second workshop was held in September 2005 to collaboratively develop a common coding guide for coding the data. Once the data were mostly coded at each study site, a third workshop was held in March 2006 to discuss data analysis. Subsequent to the first phase of data collection and analysis, a second phase of analysis on the cross-site data was undertaken. To facilitate the process of cross-site data analysis across research teams and themes, a further three workshops were held in September 2006, January 2007 and August 2007. Five working groups were established based on thematic areas of analysis relevant to the data to facilitate and manage the process of data analysis by theme for the cross-site analysis. The data presented in this paper are a subset of the larger dataset. The overall study consists of 220 in-depth interviews, 80 focus group discussions, 58 narrative scenarios, and 28 key-informant interviews. This paper focuses on data on unmarried adolescent girls; details of this sub-sample are given in Table 2.

Data collection

The qualitative methods used included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, narrative scenarios (participatory group exercises using unfinished stories), and key informant interviews (Table 2). Key informants included health providers, non-governmental organisation (NGO) activists, and community leaders. Checklists used to collect data were developed collaboratively by the research partners and translated into local languages (Hindi, Marathi, and Bangla), the commonly understood and used languages in each of the study areas. The checklists were pre-tested at each site. Informed consent letters were also translated into the local languages.

The size of each research team varied by each study area and ranged from 6 to 10 members per team. At each site interviewers with prior experience in collecting qualitative data were identified and trained and introduced to the checklists for this study. Each team received training in qualitative methods. Female and male interviewers collected data from participants

of the same sex, with a few exceptions in focus groups and narrative scenarios.Opportunistic and purposive sampling was used to identify participants. In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted in separate villages, as were men's and women's focus groups. Each participant was included in the data collection only once and only for one method (i.e., focus group or in-depth interview), and each informant was from a separate household.

Access to the study participants was obtained in different ways. In Maharashtra and Bangladesh, the research partner worked and provided services at their field site; in Rajasthan, access to the field site was obtained through a local NGO. The study started in August 2004 and the fieldwork was completed by August 2005. Oral informed consent was obtained from all study participants. To the greatest extent possible, interviews and focus group discussions were tape-recorded once consent was obtained. In Maharashtra and Bangladesh, all interviews and focus groups discussion were tape-recorded; only in Rajasthan, in a few cases when participants did not consent, tape-recording was not performed as this could have jeopardized overall data collection. In Rajasthan and Bangladesh interviews were conducted in the informants' home, but confidentiality and privacy were ensured, and interviewers were trained to change the subject if others disturbed the interview or could overhear the conversation, and also re-scheduled interviews at the convenience of the informant. In Maharashtra, interviews were conducted at the research team's offices, far from the informants' homes.

Coding and analysis

Field notes were transcribed in the local language and scrutinized by the supervisors for deficiencies and inconsistencies at the end of each day. Any gaps were filled in by revisiting participants. In Maharashtra and Rajasthan, the final handwritten transcripts in Marathi and Hindi were translated into English and entered into a computer in Microsoft Word. In Bangladesh, the data were transcribed and maintained in Bangla in Microsoft Word. Codes were defined and a code list was finalized at a workshop in Mumbai by the research partners.

The data were coded using Atlas.ti and analysed. At each site inter-coder reliability was assessed. In Rajasthan, two coders coded a random sub sample of the transcripts (10 per cent) to ensure reasonably consistent use of the code list. In Bangladesh, two interviews were coded by all the coders. At both sites, individual coders coded the data separately and checked each others' coding on at least two coded interviews. All discrepancies were discussed by the research teams. In Maharashtra, inter-coder reliability assessment was undertaken to ensure standardized coding across and between the two sites (Pune and Pachod). This was done by selecting five random interviews from both sites and having them coded by two coders and the principal investigators.

Table 2: Sample of Respondents by Site

Respondents	**FRHS**		**ICDDR,B**		**IHMP**	
	sub-site					
	rural	peri-	rural 1	rural 2	rural	urban
In-depth Interviews						
Unmarried adolescent girls	11	10	10	10	10	10
Total	61					

Key Informant interviews						
Key informants	4	4	8	1	6	5
Total	28					
Focus Group Discussions						
Unmarried adolescent girls	2	2	3	2	2	2
Mothers of adolescent girls	3	3	3	2	2	2
Fathers of adolescent girls	2	2	2	2	2	2
Total	40					
Narrative Scenarios						
Unmarried adolescent girls	1	1	1	2	1	1
Mothers of adolescent girls	2	2	1	2	0	1
Fathers of adolescent girls	1	1	2	2	1	1
Total	23					

To undertake the cross-site analysis, two stages of analysis were completed. The first stage of analysis was completed by each research team. Each team analysed their individual data to assess the range of variation and identify patterns in their data. Then the data were compared and contrasted across the sites in the second stage of analysis. The data were not pooled, so as not to lose the context-specificity of each study area. But important similarities and differences were identified in comparing the data across the three sites. At each level the in-depth interview data were analysed first and triangulated with the other data sources of FGDs, narrative scenarios, and key informant interviews.

Study Limitations

The primary objective of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of social processes that affect adolescent girls' lives and understand the nature of gender discrimination, particularly with regard to adolescent girls' health, nutrition and well-being. However, one important limitation in this study is that it presents the views of parents and girls, and not the views and experiences of boys. In all cases where there are references to boys, these are the perceptions of the respondents. Nonetheless, the findings are consistent with the broader literature on adolescence and gender discrimination.

FINDINGS

Table 3: Characteristics of girls by site

	Maharashtra	Rajasthan	Bangladesh
Poverty			
Poor	12	12	12
Non-poor	8	9	8
Girls' age			
<15	1	11	2
15-17	12	6	14
>17	7	4	4
Total	20	21	20

A. The socialization of girls

How girls are valued

Traditional roles and expectations for men and women – men as workers and financial providers and women as wives and mothers – frames how communities view women in many South Asian communities. Thus women are valued in the context of their household and reproductive responsibilities in the marital home. But females are also judged on how well they model the "ideal" woman – often characterized as chaste, agreeable and discreet – in their manners and behavior both before and after marriage.

Both girls and parents in this study reported that from an early age girls are socialized to become ideal daughters, modeling qualities that are considered desirable in females. An 18 year old girls from rural Maharashtra described how her mother encouraged her to adopt these qualities:

Mother teaches me about culture/values (sanskaar). She tells (me about) an ideal daughter's behavior. She tells me how an ideal daughter-in-law, wife should be. She gives me examples of her friends, neighbors, teachers and other ideal personalities around.

Parents and girls from each study side also reported what they believed were the characteristics of an ideal daughter. Across the sites, perceptions around girls' mobility, behavior, dress and expectations were similar. But the concept of an ideal daughter varied to some extent across sites and within each site. In Bangladesh, generally the more conservative of the three sites, more parents placed more stringent demands on a girl's behavior, including regular prayer for example in their depiction of the ideal daughter. In Maharashtra, the more progressive of the three sites, some parents believed the ideal daughter should not just to know household chores, but should also study for school and/or earn income.

Table 4: Perceived characteristics of an ideal daughter

	Maharashtra	Rajasthan	Bangladesh
Mobility			
She does not go out frequently	x	x	x
She goes out only after taking permission of elders	x	x	x
She does not stand on street for chatting	x	x	x
She comes back home before dark	x	x	x
Behavior			
She prays regularly			x
She does not play outside with boys	x	x	x
She does not talk with boys	x	x	x
She does not laugh loudly	x	x	x
She does not speak loudly	x	x	x
She does not gossip			x
Dress			
She dresses appropriately (wears chudidar with dupatta)	x	x	x
She ties hair in simple way (no fashionable hairstyles)	x		
Expectations			
She should know all the household chores	x	x	x
She should study well	x		
She should be employed to give financial support	x		

More progressive parents who value girls in roles outside of marriage, such as in school or as income earners, may be influenced by positive female role models in the family and community, or by media or other outside information sources. Parents' own experiences or education, or the personality of the girl and her relationships within the family may also impact parents' hopes for their daughters. Or, parents may see the economic and/or social advantages of girls in other roles. A 12 year old girl from Rajasthan gave her father as an example of a parent who actively supported his daughter's education:

I am closer to my father. When I entered in 8th class and I demanded 4 books from my father, my father immediately went to the book shop and purchased the books for me. I did not face and feel any problems in getting education and new clothes.

However, most parents fall somewhere between a purely traditional and a purely modern view of girls. They are influenced by a range of factors that affect how a girl is valued, and weigh the costs and benefits – social, personal and economic – of a girl's possible roles. Consequences or costs of investing in girls in non-traditional roles may range from social alienation or community gossip to a decrease in her desirability as a marital partner, while benefits may be the additional income that an educated, working girl can bring to her family or the fulfillment of a girl's aspirations.

Many or most of the qualities expected of an ideal girl are not expected of boys however. This was evident in how parents socialized sons versus daughters. Girls especially and parents often reported that there was clear gender bias in restrictions imposed on girls versus boys. Girls were required to get permission to leave the home, and they perceived that they were held accountable for their actions and were under more scrutiny than boys. A girl in Maharashtra explained how her mobility was much more restricted than her brothers after she started menstruating:

My Father does not ask my brother when he is late, but always questions me if I am late. Even if I go to the farm and I come back late he asks my mother and tries to find out the reason, I cannot go out like my brother. He can go anywhere but I can go after taking permission from my father. If I go to friend's house and spend more time, parents get angry. But if brother goes out, they do not care.

These gender-specific expectations of girls and boys are linked clearly to their future roles, as a girl from Maharashtra explains:

(My mother) feels a girl should always have the habit of working, as she has to go to (her) in-law's house. My brother works on the farm, he does not do any work in the house, and so my mother does not scold my brother and ignores him at home.

Why girls are socialized

Socialization is a way for parents to secure the best possible futures for their daughters within the context of traditional roles, and it becomes particularly acute during adolescence, when marriage decisions begin to loom. Parents care for and invest in their daughter by socializing her to attract a good husband, and so increasing her likelihood of having a better life in her marital home. Fathers from rural Maharashtra explained that parental care and support is needed to ensure girls' futures:

Girls should be taken care of and supported with guidance, education, discipline. She requires good values so that she can be self supportive, self-reliant. When she would go to in-laws, she should not be criticized. Hence (parental) care and support is needed.

In South Asia, socializing adolescent girls to follow acceptable social norms is critical because girls' behaviors and activities are strongly tied to her reputation and honor as well as the honor of her family within the community. Rules and restrictions protect both their daughters' actual chastity and their perceived chastity. Community pressure for girls to follow social norms comes in the form of gossip that can ruin a girl and/or her family's reputation, and sometimes in the form of direct pressure from extended family members and neighbors. Parents and girls who buck social norms about acceptable behaviors and activities for adolescent girls risk real harm, including the unwillingness of community members to form ties with the family by marrying with their daughters. As one adolescent girl explained:

(Mother) usually tells me to take a straight path in life. She says,'what would people say if you take a bad path? People will say that your father is a bad person. What does his daughter do?

When you are going somewhere remember that everybody knows (what you are doing). (So make sure) nobody can say anything about you.'

Parents protect their daughter's future by ensuring her reputation in the community remains intact. Their decisions about their daughters are heavily influenced by how these choices will be perceived by the community and whether they fit with community norms. Ensuring a girl's marriagability is a main motivation for decisions that are made about her health, education, mobility, social networks and future opportunities. Parents make certain that girls maintain their honor in the community by placing restrictions on their behaviors, dress, activities and interactions. One adolescent girl said,

My mother teaches me household works. If I don't do (it), my mother says, 'you will not be able to carry on these in (your marital home) and they will say bad things about you.'

A 14 year girl from Rajasthan further explained:

These rules were made to prevent girls from going astray.

Parents ensure girls are properly socialized also to protect both girls and parents after marriage. Instilling appropriate behavior is important in ensuring girls can fulfill their future role as daughter-in-law, are accepted and treated well by in-laws, and that parents' own reputations remain intact within their daughter's marital community. As mothers during a group discussion in Salumbar explain why mothers scold or even beat their daughters for speaking loudly:

They have to correct this before it becomes a habit. Because there is always a danger that if a girl has the habit of speaking loudly in mother's house she will follow the same habit in her in-laws house. Her mother-in-law will then taunt her – "Her mother must be like this too. Like mother like daughter."

How girls are socialized

The onset of menarche signals a transition that intensifies socialization and restrictions for adolescent girls. Parents and girls across the three sites consistently observe that this transition marks the end of childhood, and the start of a longer journey towards marriage. During this transition, families articulate their expectations of girls and teach them what is expected in from them. As a girl from Maharashtra says about the restrictions placed on her mobility:

Mother and father put restrictions like, you should not go outside, as now your menstrual period has started, within few days you can get married. Now you are grown up hence you should not go out frequently, we don't know how the boys outside are. Family members usually say "tell your demands and your needs, we will provide all the needs at home but you should not go outside."

Across the three study sites socialization of adolescent girls is remarkably similar. The process of socialization centers on training girls to become good daughters-in-law and preparing them for their future roles; ensuring girls follow the rules imposed on them without question; limiting

girls' mobility and communication outside of the home; and teaching her to dress, present herself and behave in an appropriate manner. Both girls and parents across the sites consistently reported similar rules and restrictions that girls were expected to follow. A girl from Maharashtra described what is expected of her:

If I do not wear chappals (sandals) or if I do not take odhani, if I laugh loudly or go out, mother scolds me.

A mother from a group discussion in Bhinder describes another quality of agreeability instilled in girls:

They said that a woman is considered talkative if she expresses her opinion without being asked. When she is asked to give her opinion then she should give her opinion. Otherwise it is wrong to do so.

Who socializes girls

Reflecting the primary roles for women in the region – that of wife, daughter-in-law, and mother – families use a girl's adolescent years to prepare her for a good future in her marital home. Parents have three roles with respect to their daughters during this time: raising them such that they will find a suitable husband; preparing them to become daughters-in-law that conform and perform to the marital home's expectations; and become dutiful wives that bear children. In the three study sites, the predominant pattern is that girls are socialized for their future roles by their mothers and in several cases also by their female relatives. Older women teach girls how to behave and monitor their behavior by restricting and controlling their mobility, dress, and habits. They also groom girls for marriage. Girls are seen as the responsibility of women only, and fathers appear to play a more removed role in this process:

A girl learns from her mother and father how to be a good daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and mother, but there are other things, which I learnt mainly from my mother. My mother taught me how to manage all the household work, and how to prepare food. My mother also explained to me how a girl should behave in her husband's place, like talking politely to others. – 13 year old girl from Bhinder

In a group discussion among fathers in a Maharashtra urban slum, one father explains each parent's role in socializing girls:

The father does not have any time at all in this regard. The mother is with them throughout the day and night. Hence she only teaches her or tells her. The father's job is just to bring home the necessary things.

Though fathers tend not to socialize their daughters directly, they and other family members – including male relatives such as brothers and uncles, closely monitor girls' movements to ensure that family honor is being maintained. In Bangladesh extended family members appear to feel it is their role to monitor and regulate girls, while in Rajasthan and Maharashtra parents seem to be the main enforcers of restrictions, though other family members such as uncles or

brothers do play a role. Even neighbors sometimes felt a duty to monitor girls. An 18 year old girl from an uban slum said,

Neighbors pressurize my parents to impose restriction on me. They (neighbors) say to my parents that your girl is young/adolescent now, hence you should not allow her to roam around. Do not allow her to talk with boys, do not allow her to be with boys. So parents don't allow me to talk or play with boys.

Most girls across the three study sites fell on the lower end of a continuum on restrictions, with full or partial restrictions. But a few girls had virtually no restrictions. But even in these cases, their parents were pressured to curb girls' freedoms. A girl in Rajasthan who attends college and is trusted by her parents describes how the community places pressure on her parents to further restrain her.

My family never places any restrictions on me to go alone for an outing but the village people question my freedom.'

Girls' responses to their socialization

Girls in this study reported that they conform to the expectations set by their parents as a means of gaining their approval, retaining their family's honor, and ensuring they are not gossiped about by neighbors and community members. Some girls have so internalized the expectations of them and the responsibility for the social consequences that they become their own enforcers. As a 16 year old girl from Mirzapur said,

I felt different from within. I felt I have grown up. So, I didn't like so much moving about. Wouldn't people say bad things [if I did]?

Other girls struggled with their parents' restrictions and sought and used strategies to overcome the limitations placed upon them, sometimes with the support of other family members who felt the restrictions were too stringent.

B. The Education of Girls

The crossroads between education and marriage

In the period from menarche to marriage, parents and adolescent girls discuss, negotiate, and decide upon either education or marriage; and this dialogue occurs simultaneously. A decision in favor of one negates the possibility of the other. How marriage is justified competes with how education is valued. Across the sites, education was primarily valued in its relation to improving girls' marriageability, and early marriage was a common practice. Many parents did not see the value of educating girls, or educating them beyond a certain level, and saw it as less important than teaching girls skills for their marital homes, including cooking and cleaning. Boys, on the other hand, were generally supported in pursuing their education. Because girls would eventually leave their parents for the marital home, and because boys tended to live with their parents in an extended family system after marriage and cared for them in their old age, the

work that boys found – and the education that established this – was vitally important to parents. Educating boys was thus seen as an investment in parents' own futures. In a focus group discussion in Rajasthan, mothers of adolescent girls said,

Why should we allow her to go for higher studies? In the future she is going to get married and do household work for which no education is required.

Girls in the study sites confirmed that parents placed lower value on their education than on the education of boys:

Yes there is discrimination because my father has only one son. So he feels that my brother should learn a lot, he should be an engineer. Father feels that he is a driver but his son should not be like him, he should do something more in life. He feels that (his son) should not face difficulties like him. Girls marry and go to other place. So parents cannot expect much from girls. Even if girls learn a lot, they are of no use to their parents. It is not so with the boys. – 18 year old girl from an urban slum in Maharashtra

Girls were seen as a burden by parents and early marriage was a way to relieve them of that burden; a parent from a focus group in Bangladesh explains:

I am rather saved. He (the head of the family) can't feed his two sons. He can't even give food to his wife. How can I survive? How can I keep them (children) alive? I have to marry her off today or tomorrow. So, if somebody takes her (marries her), I will be relieved from a (burden).

Across the study sites, the decision of when and whom a girl should marry is influenced by several factors, including community norms, whether a good marriage proposal has been offered, the age of the girl and possibly her education.

In some cases the education of girls was viewed by parents as valuable, though secondary to learning skills for marriage. As a newly married 21 year old girl from Rajasthan explained ,

My parents expected me to learn how to do all household work properly because after marriage, this would be important at in-laws' place. They also expect me to complete education properly so that if need arose; I could work to earn money. My parents expect my brother to finish his higher education properly and get a job because in the future, the financial responsibility of running the (natal) house would be on him.

The factors that act as drivers of early marriage are the same as or overlap with the barriers that undercut education. Three salient features that emerge as important drivers of early marriage are poverty; social pressure and pressure from the grooms' families; and social standing or family honor (*izzat* or *manshoman*). Discussion of early marriage was also initiated across the three sites if the girl had dropped out of school (whether by her choice or her parents); the lower dowry paid for younger girls; if the girl was perceived as a burden to her family; and if the girl had reached menarche. Similarly, barriers to education were poverty, the distance to schools, and parents' failure to motivate and support girls to do well in school and pursue further education.

The lower value placed on girls' education was evident in the greater household responsibilities given to girls even when in school. Girls reported that they still had the same amount of chores when school was in session as when on break, requiring them to "double-load" on their responsibilities, while boys generally got more care from parents and fewer chores when attending school. Girls also had limited free time compared to boys, as well as little time for recreation and play. Similar to the accounts of many of the girls in each site, an adolescent girl from Maharashtra described how her responsibilities differed from her brother's:

There is difference between my work and brother's work. I go to school, wash utensils, cook food and play only when I get free time. There is difference between my workload, and that of my brother's… brother does not work. – 15 year old from rural Maharashtra

Mothers during a focus group discussion in a Maharashtra urban slum also described the dual home and school responsibilities expected of adolescent girls:

S1: When parents go out for work, it is the adolescent girl who looks after everything in the house such as sending the younger siblings to the school, doing all household chores etc. There is no one else in our house to look after all this.
S.2: Daughter looks after the house, she gives a helping hand.
S.1: …she has to go to school also and has to do all the household chores. She has double load on her.

How parents and communities value girls' education strongly shapes whether girls continue school or drop out. Across the three study sites, of 61 girls, 26 girls were still in school while 35 had discontinued their studies. Girls from an urban slum in Maharashtra described some of the reasons for dropping out during a focus group discussion:

M 11: Some girl's do not like studying then they themselves stop going to school.
M 8: I could not grasp the studies.
M 8, M 9, M11: Parents stop girl's education.
M 11: If a girl is going to school and on the way if boys whistle by looking at her, if a boy winks, somebody eve teases,[1] then in such a case her mother says, 'you sit at home, do not go to school.'
M 7: Parents only decide to stop education.

Poverty, education and marriage

Table 5: Education-related characteristics of girls in the study

[1] Eve teasing is a term used in South Asia for public sexual harassment or aggression, usually occurring on streets, public transport or other public places. It may range from sexually suggestive comments and catcalls to inadvertent brushing or groping.

	Maharashtra	Rajasthan	Bangladesh
Girls' school enrollment status			
Currently in school	9	11	6
Poor	4	4	2
Non-poor	5	7	4
Currently not in school	11	10	14
Poor	8	7	10
Non-poor	3	3	4
Girls' education level			
$\leq 4^{th}$ standard	0	2	5
5^{th} to 7^{th} standard	2	4	5
8^{th} to 10^{th} standard	9	12	10
$> 10^{th}$ standard	9	3	0

Poverty significantly influences parent's decisions to end girls' education and marry them early. Sometimes parents are forced to choose which siblings' education they will invest in, and girls often lose out in these decisions. For example, a girl in Bangladesh explained how her parents chose to send her brother to school instead of her:

Both of us (I and my brother) studied together (in the same school). When brother completed primary education, they got him admission into a school in Matlab...I urged them a lot and said, 'Get me admission in the school'...mother did not.

Within and across the study sites, there is a clear association between poverty and girls' education. More girls currently in school were non-poor (16) than poor (10) and more girls who were no longer enrolled in school were poor (25) than non-poor (10). In Bangladesh, there seems to be less support for the education of girls than in other study sites, with only half of non-poor girls in school, and the relationship with poverty appears stronger, with 10 of 12 poor girls no longer in school. None of the girls in Bangladesh studied past the tenth standard, compared to 9 girls in Maharashtra and 3 in Rajasthan.

An 18 year old girl in Rajasthan who dropped out because she felt she needed to contribute financially to her family explained the struggle between continuing school and financial constraints:

When I failed the Class 10 examination, I discontinued studies. My father wanted me to continue, but had I resumed studies, I would not have been able to work and earn. We live in a joint family with 18 members. There are so many mouths to feed, that even though everyone in the house earns, the financial situation is not very comfortable. I also had to work to help out. However, I do want to appear for the examination again.

However a few parents saw educating girls as an opportunity to alleviate financial concerns. A 17 year old girl from an urban slum in Maharashtra explained that her parents valued her ability to contribute income to the family:

My father expects that I should study a lot, take care of the house and improve the financial condition of the family.

But as fathers in Rajasthan explained, even though some parents are beginning to value educated girls and their potential as income earners, poverty prevents them from investing in their daughters:

People now know that if children get educated they will have good future but it is not possible for all to educate their children as they don't have money to send their children to school. The economic condition of many families is bad. The main reality is that parents don't have money to educate their children and hence nowadays they find this excuse, that girls anyway have to cook in the future when they get married so why educate them?

In Bangladesh and Maharashtra, poverty was often an underlying consideration when a good marriage proposal arrived, as early marriage could result in paying less dowry to the groom. Even under circumstances where parents somewhat valued education, the offer of a good marriage could sway them in favor of marriage at the expense of their daughter's education. As a newly married girl from Maharashtra said,

When the parents are so poor, one has no option and has to get married. I got married since there was no option. I did not want to get married. I did not want to get married so early. They said 'do it now.' My parents forced me to do it now. I said not now, but they said 'we are not sure about the future, whether we would be able to (marry you later) or not'

When asked why parents marry their daughters when a good groom is identified, even though the girl is too young, a girl from Bangladesh explained,

Parents marry off (their daughters) because they think 'the groom is good. We may not get another groom like this one in the future, because our economic condition is not well. So, now as we have found this groom at our convenience, we don't have to spend much. And dowry, it is available (common) here. If we find that we have to pay less dowry or that groom is fine, we must marry off our daughters.'

Dowry is always required for marriage and can influence the decision to marry a girl to a particular suitor. Only parents and other senior family members, particularly men, from both the girl and boy's side are involved in this negotiation. Marriage is pushed to an earlier age if a good proposal is made for the girl. Parents may accept this marriage even though the girl is younger than when they planned to marry her because of poverty and because of consequences in the community if they reject the proposal. Also, the more daughters parents have in a home, the more likely that some or all the girls will get married at a younger age, as parents face

greater community pressure to marry their daughters when they have many and because the dowry will be lower the younger girls are.

Family honor, early marriage and distance to schools

In a family where a girl has come of age, *izzat* or family honor is in part derived from the girl remaining chaste and maintaining a good reputation. Maintaining one's *izzat* is both an important barrier to higher education and a driver of early marriage. Parents in all three sites often describe the imposition of restrictions (described in previous sections) as a means of maintaining their personal and family honor and protection for their daughters. Similarly, in interviews, girls also perceive that their actions reflect on their family's honor, and that it is their responsibility to maintain their family's honor by behaving as expected of them, seeking permission if they need to go anywhere outside the home, and limiting their outings to a minimum. A girl in Maharashtra explains:

Daughter is parents' honour (izzat). If girls name is spoilt, father and mother lose honor in village, hence parents expect simple behaviour from the daughter. Restrictions are imposed as people start talking. Boys may tease girls or trouble girls hence parents do not permit girls to go out and talk to boys…

Similarly a father from a focus group discussion in Bangladesh explains:

Suppose my daughter is aged 12. If she goes anywhere and a man makes a comment then I'll lose honor. … If she wants to go somewhere if I have a son he'd take her, or she'd go with me, or if she has a sister-in-law she'd go with her.

Reaching menarche, as mentioned previously, is a turning point for adolescent girls and their parents, and this life event makes palpable the realities of social pressure and insecurity, and magnifies the need to protect girls' chastity and reputation to protect family honor. This is therefore also a significant underlying reason that precipitates early marriage and acts as a barrier to education as mobility becomes strictly controlled. A father from a focus group discussion in Bangladesh explains:

Mobility of an adolescent girl declines once she reaches menarche as both she and her family members face a fear that if she gets sexually assaulted the society would disgrace her and the family.

Similarly, a newly married girl from Maharashtra explains how onset of menarche precipitates marriage:

I just came to age (menstruation started) and immediately my parents started looking for marriage (suitors). I got married after 8 months of menstruation. (My parents) were in a hurry to get (me) engaged. My engagement was completed in a hurry. Then my marriage (was) done.

Lack of access to nearby schools often leads to girls ending school earlier, as attending schools that are outside the village or too far away come with perceived risks to girls' safety (such as

risk of eve teasing), higher daily transportation costs than local schools, and possible social gossip. As a result, these farther away schools are rarely available to girls. Girls are thus often required to drop out when their grade level is not available in their village. Boys, on the other hand, are not perceived to face safety risks, receive greater monetary investment in their education, and are not as vulnerable to gossip, all of which allow them to access schools that are further away.

During a group discussion in Rajasthan, adolescent girls explained why a fictional girl named "Laxmi" would probably drop out of school after the 8th standard:

Laxmi wants to take up a career in teaching but her parents will not allow her to pursue her study. After 8th standard she will drop out of school because after marriage she has to make roti (bread) and also in this village school is available up to the 8th standard. Parents do not allow daughters to go out of village for study because they are apprehensive that something untoward might happen. If they allow her to go there she might run away with a boy from another caste. Even if she doesn't, her parents will be afraid that their community will spread such rumors.

Girls themselves chose to drop out because travelling outside of the village for school posed risks to them:

My parents wanted me to get a higher education but I didn't like that. There is a school in the village but it is just till 8th standard. If I want to study further, I have to go to the neighboring village. I was going to the other village for education but then there were these eve teasers so I discontinued my studies.

Fathers in Rajasthan also said that gossip and the need to protect the reputations of the girl and her family prevents parents from sending girls to distant schools.

Even if we want to educate our daughters there are no facilities here to do so. There is also a big problem of maintaining safety for girls if one wants to send girls to school to another village. Because of issues like one's safety many families don't send girls for higher education whereas such a problem doesn't exist for boys, they can move alone whenever they want. There is a school here in the village till 12th standard. A girl here thus gets education till 12th standard and not more than this.

Many adolescent girls in Rajasthan said that they wanted to study in secondary school and that their greatest unfulfilled need was a secondary school in their village. Mothers in Rajasthan said they would be willing to support their daughters attending secondary school if a school was available in the village or if there was a reliable person available to accompany girls to a secondary school in another village.

A 15 year old girl in Rajasthan explained how the lack of a secondary school in her village forced her to leave school:

I myself have studied up to 9th standard and then discontinued. There is no secondary school in my village and I was not allowed to go out of the village to study. I wished to study more but could not.

In Mirzapur, Bangladesh, mothers of adolescent girls said that the distance to school heavily influenced their decisions about their daughters' education. During a discussion of a fictional character named "Nasima," mothers explained that though many parents would not send a girl to a distant school, some parents might be willing if they fully trusted a girl to behave in an ideal manner:

S1: You know, I do not want to send my daughter that far (from here).
S2: If Nasima's parents understand her, and if the school is good and provides good education, distance is not a problem.

Another mother added that, though there was variation in parents' decisions, most parents in her community would not let their girls attend schools outside of the village:

S2: But (many) parents do not want to send (their daughters) to a distant school…it happens in many families.
S3: For instance, one-fourth send their daughters to school (outside of the village), three-fourths are left (without school).

Girls confirm that school distance and its cost implications affects whether girls continue their education during a focus group discussion in Matlab, Bangladesh:

S1: If I get admission into a distant school I have to go to and come from the school by walking. I cannot spend (money) everyday.
S2: Meaning, isn't that expensive if the school is far? But, if it is nearby it costs almost nothing.

When asked if parents disapprove of going to schools outside of the village if the cost is higher, girls said,

S1: Father does not want to provide; he cannot.
S2: (He says) '(I) must have money. You will go far to study, how can I provide that amount of money? If (the school) were nearby, I could send you there.'

Yet when asked if this is the same response that would be given to a son, girls replied,

S2: (Father) would buy (his son) a bicycle…

Fathers of adolescent girls agree that transportation costs and distance affect decisions to send a girl for further education, adding that community gossip and its affect on the reputation of both the girl and her family also contribute to these decisions:

The school in our locality is nearby so she can take the short-cut way for coming and going (to

and from school). One will need Tk. 20 to go there and the same for coming. Is that possible? … For instance, my son can go there at one time by walking and at the other by rickshaw. But (my) daughter cannot go there by walking. She has to go (to school) always by rickshaw.

When asked why girls could not also walk to school, fathers replied,

It looks odd. (People would say) 'his(grown up daughter) walks to the college. What kind of parents does she have?' If the (son) walks (to school) throughout the year, nobody will say, 'Your son goes to school or college by walking.' If the (daughter) walks (to school) even for a few days, people will report, 'It looks so bad that the girl walks everyday!

That is, parents are monitored by the community on how well they are perceived to care and protect their daughters, by not letting them walk to school for example. Parents that do not demonstrate this protectiveness are gossiped about as unfit or irresponsible.

Though distance to school is reported by many parents and girls as one of the main reasons girls are forced to drop out of school, a few parents prevent girls from attending nearby schools as well. For example, a 19-year-old girl in Rajasthan explained her limited mobility:

I studied in Udaipur till 8th class but my parents stopped my studies because I am the eldest child and I had to go outside (the house to attend school). I do not get permission for going out from my parents. I cannot even go to my neighbor's home. My father has told my mother that she should not allow me to go out.

However, a few parents are able to buck social pressure and invest financially in their daughters to send them for further schooling even when these schools are far away. For example, an 18 year old girl from rural Maharashtra convinced her parents to let her study outside the village and stay in a hostel:

In my village, there is nobody else educated like me, that is why my parents and brother feel proud of me and hence they are affectionate to me. After tenth standard I wanted to study at Aurangabad. (My parents) agreed with my decision.

Lack of parental support for education and social pressure for marriage

When asked why parents support girls less on education than boys, some girls across the study sites explained that boys are more interested in school than girls:

The boys are interested in studying and so they go to school. This was also why my father pays more attention to my brothers' education. – 14 year old girl from Rajasthan

In fact a number of girls in the study say that their lack of interest was why they dropped out of school. Girls reported that though boys and girls generally went to the same schools and received the same type of education, girls received less encouragement and pressure to do well in school and stay in school than boys. Most parents expected girls to end their education before

reaching higher levels, while boys were expected to complete secondary school and encouraged to pursue higher education if possible.

Interestingly, while girls were never allowed to continue school without the expressed support of their parents, girls who dropped out reported they could often do so without pressure from parents to stay in school. That is, parents failed to show strong disapproval or to motivate these girls to continue school as they normally do with boys. As a 15 year old girl who dropped out after 5th standard from Rajasthan explains,

Compared to my brother, less importance was paid to the girls' schooling. … As I was also not interested in studies, I quit school after Class 5 and started helping in the household. There was no pressure on me to continue or discontinue my studies. The decision was mine.

In other cases, parents themselves forced their daughters to drop out of school after what they considered enough education. For example, in Bangladesh, of 14 girls who dropped out of school, 6 did so at the request of their parents, while in Maharashtra, of 11 girls who dropped out, 2 did so at the request of their parents. Parents who expected girls to drop out either did so because of financial constraints or because the girl was needed at home, such as to care for a sick parent. Though these girls were forced to drop out of school irrespective of their own wishes, the decision to continue school required both the willingness of the girl and the support of her parents, with parents making the final decision about whether a girl could continue her education. Without both, a girl was likely to drop out. As a girl from rural Maharashtra summed up,

If parents give permission to study further, only then can we continue our education.

Many parents also expected girls to leave school after a certain level because they believed, up to that level education would make the girl more desirable as a marriage partner, but beyond it she would be less likely to find a suitable marriage partner. In Bangladesh and Rajasthan, this appears to be around 10th standard, while in Maharashtra it appears to be later for some girls. A girl in Bangladesh explained how her education ended after 10th standard:

I hoped I would go to college once I pass my S.S.C. exam. If I pass I would get into a job for betterment. My father said once I pass my S.S.C. I need not study further. I said to my father, the school (encouraged) me (to continue school). But he said, 'No, you don't need to continue your study anymore.' Then I didn't push anymore.

Lack of parental support for education, social pressure for marriage and insecurity (in terms of girls' safety) conspire to undercut education and drive the practice of early marriage. Social pressure is referred to both in broad and specific terms. In focus group discussions, it is clear that informants perceive social pressure at the community level where community members may make comments or pass judgment on when girls should get married in each context; a focus group participant from Rajasthan explains:

Social pressure for marriage is common. This is a custom in the area, such things are happening for a quite long time now, a girl has to follow these customs…[there is] fear that a

girl after she becomes matured may spoil herself and bring bad name to the family; as a result, marriages were carried out early at the age of 5-6 years when she is not able to understand many things. There is continuous social pressure to marry off girls at an early age.

But this is also intertwined with the notion of social insecurity in which families fear for their daughters' physical safety, chastity, and reputation. These in turn also affect family honor and precipitate early marriage:

We marry our girls at an early age due to fear of society. People whisper that there is some problem in a girl and that is why she is not married off. We prefer to get our daughters married as early as possible. Girls go to the field with herds of goats. They are alone there. We may have to hear comments from society if anything untoward incident happens, because of this we decide to get her married. - FGD participant Rajasthan

In specific terms, girls' and their families' often experience social pressure to arrange a marriage quickly and when it is perceived to be the right time; in particular this form of pressure can come from extended family members, and often the grooms' families. Under these circumstances, parents have little choice but to proceed with a marriage:

That time I didn't want to get married but my mother-in-law and father-in-law had told my father, 'Get her married, after marriage she will be in our hands for help.' My father did not want me to get married that time but my father-in-law decided. As they are elder relatives (my paternal auntie's husband) we had to listen. As mother-in-law and father-in-law told (us), my father took the decision to get me married. I was given in aunt's house. - married adolescent girl Maharashtra

Despite the lack of support and opportunities experienced by many girls in the study, a few parents had very high expectations of their daughters with respect to their education, and provided the level of support normally given to boys:

During school I had studied computers up to class 12. I will have to ask at home if I want to study further. But my parents also want me to get more education so I think they will be ready to support my decision...There are no differences in our household in the type of education my brother and I got. I received the same education as my bother and we both studied in the same school… . – 18 year old girl from Bhinder, Rajasthan

(My family) cared for my education (by saying) 'go to study, you have to read till this time.' They never allowed me to do any (domestic) work. I have to study all the time. – adolescent girl from Bangladesh

Across the study sites, fathers tended to support education with the aim of future employment for their daughters more than mothers, whose expectations of their daughters centered more on learning household tasks well and marrying a suitable partner. Fathers also tended to support girls more for higher education, while mothers tended to support education only up to the secondary level. An 18 year old girl from Rajasthan shared her father's hopes for her future:

My father encouraged me to study and reappear for my Class 10 examinations and helped me clear the exam. He wants me to study more and qualify for the job of a teacher in the school or a sister at the hospital.

However, even progressive parents who allow girls to continue school do so under the condition that girls follow strict social conventions in their dress, behavior and social interactions. That is, girls had to prove that their behavior is "ideal" to receive support for further education. These restrictions are a way to protect girls in settings where parents perceive they may be more vulnerable to gossip or harassment. During a group discussion, a 16 year old girl from an urban slum in Maharashtra said:

I have a strong desire for wearing jeans but parents shout at me if I insist on wearing jeans. All my college friends wear jeans and a top. My parents told me to wear only chudidar (traditional Indian outfit). When I go to college wearing a chudidar, my friends tease me saying 'look how she has come.' If I tell this to my father, he shouts at me, saying 'let them do whatever they want, you have to do as you are told.' Thus we can't break the restrictions immediately. Mother says 'you have already fulfilled your wishes when you were small. Now you are grown up so you should listen to elders as they are saying this for your good future.'

A father from an urban slum in Maharashtra explained that parents also risk their own reputation when sending a girl to school, particularly continuing her education longer than other girls. Thus girls are expected to adhere to stringent rules about how they should behave:

If she goes to school looking down then people tell that your daughter is very good. She does not talk to anybody. Other girls do not behave this way on the way to school. Those girls are not ideal girls.

A girl in Bangladesh reported that she received more support for her education from her family because she met their expectations:

They are more affectionate to me because I am good student, I study well, I behave properly and I do not disobey others. That is, I always obey my parents. I never mix with bad boys. You know many things happen in school life. I never do any of those things.

Overall, though parents in each site ranged in whether or not they supported their daughters' education, most parents tended to want better futures for their daughters and did support their education up to a certain level, unless there were financial constraints, lack of higher level schools, or a good marriage offer. Parents in Maharashtra were more likely to associate education with a brighter future for girls than in other sites, while in Bangladesh parents were least likely to make this association. This is also consistent with the pattern of education for girls across the three sites, as girls in Bangladesh in this sample did not study beyond the tenth standard.

Most parents in all sites tended to associate this brighter future of girls with a good marriage, and believed education could attract a more suitable marriage partner. They also believed education could be beneficial to their daughters because they would be more self-reliant, more

likely to be employed and financially independent, and thus more likely to be able to manage complications that arose in her marriage. As fathers in Rajasthan said,

Most of us do think that daughter should get educated, become intelligent, take care of her family, should get good in-laws and live her life happily. If a daughter gets educated she will in turn educate children; she will live happily with her in-laws.

A 16 year old girl from Rajasthan agreed that some parents believe girls should be self-reliant:

My father wants me to complete studies and take up employment because my sisters are interested in taking up a job. He believes that 'a girl should stand on her own feet.'

But a 13 year old girl from Rajasthan explains that her mother expects education to be balanced with traditional roles required for marriage:

My mother expects from all her children that they study and become independent. But she also expects that I am good in housework so that my future is comfortable.

Finally, a mother in Maharashtra explained during a group discussion her belief that education can be a protection against marital problems and possibly violence in marriage, as well as can provide financial independence:

Nowadays our daughters have to face trouble. After marriage they are harassed badly. Hence she should be educated so that she will not have problems after marriage. She can work outside and be self-reliant.

Girls' aspirations for education and marriage

While adolescent girls in South Asia are required to meet the many expectations of their families and communities and cope with a broad range of restrictions imposed by their parents, they also respond to the new experiences in their lives and looming decisions about their future by developing their own aspirations. In the three study sites, girls expressed hopes particularly about their education, careers and future marriages. Yet what these girls hoped for varied widely, as each had different influences shaping their aspirations. These influences included the expectations of their parents and community; their exposure to new ideas, role models and opportunities; and the level of agency they were encouraged to develop.

The way in which they were socialized by their parents and communities in particular played a significant role in shaping girls' aspirations. Oftentimes, girls internalized their families' expectations and their own hopes tended to reflect their parents' hopes for them, as illustrated in the aspirations of a 14 year old from Rajasthan:

I am in the 8th standard. If my parents approve then I would want to study till 12th standard. I would like to get married after completing my 12th standard studies. My parents also want me to get married at the age of 18-19 years.

However, some girls in the study had developed aspirations that conflicted with parental expectations or with community norms. These independent views may reflect personal traits, but may also have come from peers, examples in the media, school or outside activities such as a life skills course. For example, a 16 year old girl from Bangladesh who had to drop out after 8th standard appeared to value education for the agency it had provided her:

I had great interest for studying….I wanted to take private tuition and become a good student because education is one's own and very personal.

Some girls said they wanted to complete secondary school only, followed by marriage, though not all of these girls knew if their parents would support them in finishing secondary school. Other girls still in school aspired to pursue higher education, followed by a career. For some girls this appeared to be an unlikely dream whereas for others, particularly those actively supported by parents, their aspirations seemed more likely to be fulfilled:

Yes, I would like to take more education, up to thirteenth standard, whatever education is available. I would like to become a doctor. – 14 year old girl from rural Maharashtra

I want to complete my master's degree in arts and my parents also support me… My parents expect that I get educated and independent. They expect that after I get good education I will get married to an educated and earning husband. They expect that I will be allowed to do a job after marriage and become economically independent. I too want to do a job after marriage. – 18 year old girl from Bhinder, Rajasthan

However, several girls in Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Bangladesh wanted to drop out. Girls reported various reasons for wanting to drop out, including a lack of interest in studies, doing poorly in school, or feeling embarrassed to have to repeat a class:

When I had gone for cutting sugarcane I had lost one year of schooling. All my friends had passed and were promoted. As I failed, I was kept behind. Then I decided to leave school. My parents were ready to continue my education but I myself took the decision. The girls in my class were younger than me and I used to look tall and big. When I had failed, I felt bad. – 16 year old girl from rural Maharashtra

Unmarried adolescent girls from the three sites ranged from girls whose parents had "fixed" (decided) or were in the process of fixing their marriage to those whose marriage had not yet begun to be negotiated. Overall, families of most girls had not yet fixed or started fixing their marriages. For a majority of girls across the sites, no marriage discussions had yet taken place. But some girls, 11 in Maharashtra, 8 in Bangladesh, and 5 in Rajasthan, already had marriage proposals or marriage discussions had begun.

Despite their actual marriage-related situations, most girls had their own preferences about when they wanted to get married and what they hoped for in potential suitors and from their future husbands and in-laws. Across the study sites, many more girls, both girls whose marriage negotiations had and had not yet begun expressed hopes or expectations that they would be included in decisions about their marriage. Twelve of 20 girls in Rajasthan whose marriage

negotiations had not yet begun hoped to marry at age 18 rather than 15 to 16, as was normal in their communities. Thirteen of 20 respondents in Maharashtra, for example, hoped their parents would seek their input in marriage-related decisions. In Bangladesh however, few girls hoped to be able to be involved in decision-making about their marriage, almost all were resigned to the fact that they would not be involved in this decision – which is consistent with what parents from Bangladesh reported in focus groups. Girls reported that their biggest fear about marriage was if their in-laws would treat them well.

Though many girls whose marriage discussions have not yet begun say they expect or hope to have a voice in future marriage decisions, some girls say they expect to have no say, or do not want any say in decisions about their marriage. One 18 year-old girl from Maharashtra explains:

Discussion about my marriage is going on since I completed my tenth standard examination. Parents will take the final decision, they would not consult me. I would be only asked about my acceptance of the proposal. I know if marriage is fixed against my wish, there may be problems later after marriage. But still I cannot decide against the decision of parents.

A few girls however expect to have a strong influence on their parents' decision-making, such as on delaying marriage or selecting a partner. One girl from Bangladesh explains how she would negotiate with her family:

Yes, my parents would ask me, ' do you want to marry now?' then I might share with my friend that I would not marry at present, I am not eligible now. I'd marry later. I would plan my future…. If she negotiates then they might not arrange my marriage. My mother would listen (to me). … she would not force me. She would understand, 'my daughter does not want to marry now. If I arrange it she might not stay with her husband… if she would have a job, would have a stability in life then she would marry.' Thus she would take note and father would agree.

A 15 year old girl in rural Maharashtra also explains how she would negotiate for her wishes:

Parents would ask my opinion before deciding my marriage. Suppose they decide to marry me early I would convince them that I am young so they can wait for few years. I have not fully grown. If I get married now and get pregnant then the child's weight would be too less and it may die. After eighteen years, whenever parents say, I will prefer to get married. My participation would be there – that is, suppose if I like the boy but they are asking too much money then I would refuse…

However, the experiences of girls whose marriages had already been set indicated that most girls actually had little say on whom and when they marry. Where girls have no decision-making authority regarding the choice of a life partner and their age at marriage, early marriage itself cuts off young women's aspirations before they have had a chance to fully form. Girls frequently used expressions such as "married off" and "marriage fixed" to describe arrangements for their lives that were out of their control. A 17 year old girl in 10th standard from the Bangladesh study site had a clear understanding that, though she might have aspirations, her own future was not in her hands:

It is usual that there will be differences between my brothers' and my own future. Difference, like I will be married off and sent to another's house. When I will stay in another's house I will be in their control. But my brothers control their own lives.

Decision-making around education and marriage

Girls whose aspirations differed from those of their parents had to choose whether and how to negotiate for their wishes. Girls with more education were more likely to negotiate for their aspirations and were more likely to be supported by their parents. Oftentimes younger girls were the most optimistic about their ability to succeed in negotiations about their education, while older girls were less sure of their success or had given up trying. Most girls in Maharashtra and Rajasthan communicated with their parents about their wishes regarding their education, with a few even requesting that their parents provide tutors or financial support. Only about one-third of girls in Bangladesh communicated their wishes about school to their parents.

Girls were more able to negotiate for education than for a delay in marriage; most girls had little say in decisions about their marriage. Even when their opinions were sought, parents made final decisions. Girls usually only participated in decision-making about their marriage when they were asked by their parents, and they never made these decisions alone. Only a few girls had a strong influence on their parent's decisions on this matter. Many girls were uninterested in influencing these decisions because they did not see it as acceptable given their position in the family.

While marriages were arranged by parents, in the majority of cases across the three sites it is clear that various family and community members played an active and important role in identifying potential grooms and proposals and bringing them to the attention of parents. While these family and community members had significant influence over initiating and facilitating marriage proposals, the final decision in the majority of cases was made by parents, predominantly fathers. In many instances where relatives were involved these were joint decisions between parents and extended family members, frequently dominated by male relatives. Thus the initiation and decision-making around marriage do not happen in isolation - that is, parents are often not alone in the process of marrying off their daughters.

Two girls, one in Rajasthan and the other in Maharashtra, explained that they expected to make decisions about their education jointly with her parents:

My future plan is to become a Doctor. My parents would decide about my schooling and further studies but I would also be involved in that decision. – 13 year old girl from Rajasthan

In future, I think I should do service, I wish to become a lecturer. My parents will consult me if I wish to take education further." – 18 year old girl from rural Maharashtra

However a few girls said they had never communicated their preferences to their parents. For example, an 18 year old girl in Maharashtra did not communicate her wishes because it was unacceptable to offer opinions to elder family members who would be making decisions about her future:

I wanted to be a Nurse but don't know whether my wish will be fulfilled or not. My elder aunty and uncle will decide about whether to continue my studies or not because my marriage is arranged.

A girl from Bangladesh said she did not communicate about her wishes because she felt it would be futile:

I wanted to sit for the (final) exam (but) when (father) said (not to sit for this year), I have nothing to say… I deliberately didn't say (anything) because I knew it would not work out. I didn't even ask whether I would sit for exam or not.

Another girl from Bangladesh also did not communicate her wishes, though hoped her father would take the initiative to send her back to school:

See, I am staying at home, working, eating or loitering…that's all. Now my father doesn't ask me 'Why don't you go to school? Why don't you do any work?' He never says anything like this. But I am still expecting that my father would say, 'Go to school or learn something. How does it look if you stay at home?' He doesn't say that!

Girls in Bangladesh were less like to communicate their wishes to their parents and, of those who did communicate, were less often successful. Overall, girls in Maharashtra and Rajasthan were more likely to participate in decision-making or make decisions on their own about their education than girls in Bangladesh.

Table 6: Influence of girls on education-related decisions

	Maharashtra	Rajasthan	Bangladesh
Parents/other family members make decision alone	2	6	9
Parents and girls decide jointly	9	11	1
Girls make decision alone	9	0	6

Girls who wished to discontinue school and communicated this to their parents were always successful in attaining this wish. But girls who did not communicate their education-related preferences often forfeited a chance to influence these decisions, leaving parents to make the decision alone. Also, girls from poor families were less likely to be successful when they communicated their desire for further education, and more likely to be forced to leave school, than those from non-poor families, as oftentimes parents faced financial constraints that made them unable or unwilling to pay school-related expenses. For example, in Bangladesh, of the 10 girls from poor families currently not in school, 3 dropped out of school due to poverty. In 3 other cases, a parent asked them to drop out.

In contrast to girls' influence on their education, few girls communicated about their wishes regarding their marriage, and many of these only after they were first asked by parents for their opinion. At the same time, in interviews girls expressed a desire for parents to consider their opinion, and often expressed a wish to delay their marriage to a later age than was expected in their communities.

Girls who communicated about marriage discussed whether they wanted to delay getting married, whether or not they approved a particular suitor, and whether a requested dowry was acceptable or not. Girls sometimes talked to parents themselves, or to female relatives hoping that their relatives could convey their wishes on their behalf. In Bangladesh, girls were not likely to talk to their fathers about their marriage preferences because of shyness or embarrassment.

Most girls did not communicate their preferences regarding their marriage to their parents, particularly in Bangladesh. For example, in Bangladesh, nearly half of girls (8 of 20) said they would not talk to their families about their marriage. However, some girls (6 of 20) said they would communicate if they wanted to delay the marriage or if they did not like the proposal.

Some girls who did not communicate their preferences about their marriage said they did not do so because in their families girls are not allowed to discuss their marriage or if they state their wishes, they are ignored; an adolescent girl from a focus group in Maharashtra explains:

If we say something, elder persons stop us and say 'younger children do not talk in between when older people are talking.'

Similarly, a girl in Bangladesh said:

I have nothing to say in this regard (about the proposal)… (parents) would ask, 'do you like the groom?' If I reject the proposal they will not proceed…(My parents) will listen to me if my opinion matches with them... (But if my opinion does not match with theirs) they will not listen to me.

In Maharashtra, a girl from a focus group discussion explained how little influence girls have on decisions regarding their marriage:

Even though girl tries to convince parents to postpone the marriage they will not listen. Parents will say that the proposal is good so get married…

When asked if boys were allowed to participate in decisions about marriage, girls during focus group discussions in Maharashtra said that though adolescent girls were often not allowed to communicate or participate in decision-making on marriage, adolescent boys often were. One girl explained,

Girls are not allowed to take part in the discussion of elder persons. If boys are grown up parents listen to their suggestion also, but young boys are not allowed. Elders allow boys to participate in decision-making process but do not allow girls to do so.

Other girls said they did not communicate their wishes to their parents because it reflected badly on their family's honor or reputation if they questioned their parents' decision, asked to delay marriage, or a proposal rejection spurred gossip that the girl was involved with another boy. A family's prestige in the community may also be harmed, girls say, if parents have to go back on their word to the boy's parents because of a girl's preference. For example, in Maharashtra, 7 out of 20 respondents said that they cannot give an opinion against their parent's decisions because people will start talking about the family and the parents will suffer because of it:

I do not insist on changing parent's decision because if I do so people will criticize me and say that 'does she thinks she is more intelligent? She regards herself very smart! How dare she decide herself?'

In all the study sites, girls whose marriage negotiations had already started or whose marriage had been fixed had had little or no input on decisions about their marriage.

Table 7: Perceived influence on marital decision-making among girls whose marriage was being negotiated or had been fixed

	Maharashtra	Rajasthan	Bangladesh
Parents made decision alone	5	14	12
Parents and girls decided jointly or girls gave input	14	5	0
Girls made decision alone	0	0	0

A 13-year old girl from Rajasthan who hoped to study further explained:

... I have never seen my fiancé and he has not seen me. But my parents did not ask me about my choice of husband. In our community, parents don't ask the girl's point of view.

However, other girls have reported that, to some extent, parents included them in making decisions about their marriage. Nineteen girls in Rajasthan and Maharashtra had either had their input sought or made decisions jointly with parents, but in Bangladesh, none of the girls were able to provide input on decisions about their marriage. But even when girls were asked their opinion about decisions regarding their marriage, final decisions were always made by parents, sometimes against the girl's wishes. A girl from Maharashtra said:

My marriage was fixed after I finished my twelfth standard examination. My elder uncle asked me whether I liked would be husband. My uncle took the final decision. He also asked me whether I like boy or not.

However, trends are changing and it is becoming more common among the more educated and urban families to seek the daughter's opinion, even if by non-verbal communication. For

example, in Rajasthan, mothers in focus groups said that, if parents wished a girl to marry but she was not ready, she should communicate this to her parents and that educated parents would support her wishes:

(If she's not ready) then the girl would tell her father that she is not ready for the marriage.

Another mother added:

If the parents are understanding mature and educated, they could understand and also agree with her.

Similarly in focus group discussions in Bangladesh, parents said that they would be willing to consider girls' opinions on marriage when girls earn money or have higher education, but for girls with little or no education, their opinion would not be considered. However, in this sample none of the girls from Bangladesh were working or had reached higher education, so none of the girls could influence marriage decisions, as expected. Moreover, since higher education and employment for adolescent girls are rare occurrences in these sites, it is also unclear whether in reality parents would consider the opinions of working or more educated girls with regard to marriage.

Girls' strategies to influence education and marriage decisions

Girls who did communicate about their education and/or marriage used a range of strategies to negotiate their wishes, including direct verbal communication with parents, indirectly communicating with parents by asking others to negotiate on their behalf, and non-verbal tactics such as getting good grades, refusing food, or refusing to learn skills that increased their marriagability. For example, in hopes of convincing her parents to allow her to continue her education, one girl in Bangladesh refused to eat:

I dropped out of school two years back. I was very upset at that time. All my friends were in school…a couple of days ago I didn't eat for two days so that they send me to school again. But it didn't work out.

Another girl from Maharashtra, in 12th standard, wanted to continue her education but was afraid to communicate her wishes to her strict father. She decided to study hard and get good grades in the hopes of convincing her father to continue her education:

My father is educated. Whatever he says we have to listen, even mother has to listen to him. My father will decide whether to continue my education or not. But I will get good results, so that he will give me permission for continuing the education.

Another girl was certain that, though she was not involved in decision-making about her education, she could change her father's mind should he decide to stop her schooling:

Whether I have to take education in future or not will be decided by my father. I will not be involved in this decision, but I will study further even if they do not permit. I will convince him

for continuing my education." - 15 year old girl from rural Maharashtra

On delaying marriage, a 17 year old urban girl from Maharashtra explains how she would negotiate:

If my parents would decide my marriage earlier then I would tell them that I am too young to get married now. I hope my parents will listen to me. But I will try to make them understand that they shouldn't make any hurry about deciding my marriage.

Similarly on the issue of dowry, a girl from Bangladesh said:

My father agreed (with the proposal). Then they demand fifty thousand taka. After demanding dowry I turned down the proposal. (I said) no, l do not want my happiness at the cost of the hardship that my parents have to go through in order to pay such high amount of dowry. (I would prefer to) remain unmarried till old age rather than marry here.

Communication of any type ensured girls at least had a chance of influencing decision-making about their education, though this was rarely the case with their marriage. In Maharashtra, for example, all of the12 girls who communicated their wishes about their education to their parents were successful: 9 dropped out of school as they had desired, while 3 were successful in convincing their parents to let them continue school. For example, an 18 year old girl from rural Maharashtra negotiated with her parents to continue her education, though there was no school for her grade level in the village:

My parents think that I should take good education, get a good job, and earn fame in society and that is why, when I wanted to join 11th standard after 10th, I put forth my opinion before them. I promised them that I would behave well in the hostel, study well. I convinced them about the importance of education in these days.

Other girls, even when they clearly communicated their wishes to their parents, were not successful. One adolescent girl said,

My mother does not care much about my education. My teachers asked me to study under a tutor so that I perform better. I was a good student… if you tell me anything once, I'll reproduce it accurately… I asked mother several times to pay (the tutor's) tuition fee but she didn't try (to arrange the payment).

To delay their marriage, some girls said they would indirectly communicate with their parents by asking third parties such as relatives to intervene when direct communication was unsuccessful. When asked in focus groups in Maharashtra how a girl could convince her parents to postpone her marriage, girls initially suggested direct communication and then agreed that using third parties to advocate on their behalf would be more effective. Parents in another Bangladesh focus group agreed:

No, she can't say (that she doesn't want to marry) by herself. She can convey this message through her sister-in-law (older brother's wife). Sister-in-law will tell this to her parents-in-law.

Finally, other girls used non-verbal tactics to persuade their parents to agree to their wishes. One girl in Bangladesh refused to learn cooking skills that would increase her attractiveness to potential suitors:

My sisters-in-law say that cook this way…use the spices (onion, garlic etc.) properly. Again they say, ' Look, how I cook.' I said, 'I don't have to look at that. I will not cook.' Then they ask, 'why will you not?' I said, 'truth to say, don't say anything to my father …I could cook if I want to. But if it tastes good my father would say that I could cook and he would try for my marriage.

Changing trends

These findings from Bangladesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan show that while parents in South Asia have similar concerns and factors they must consider, the way in which they weigh them and their decisions about girls' futures vary. Some parents tip easily towards early marriage. Others favor educating girls but only up to a certain grade level. And a few but growing number of parents enthusiastically support ongoing education and careers for their daughters.

In reality parents and girls must struggle with the window of opportunity within which girls must be married. Missing this window means greater expense for a girl's marriage, lack of good suitors for marriage, and fewer good proposals of marriage. Hence, education to a particular level is most appealing to parents; as a strategy this fulfills their and their daughters' desire for a better future, without jeopardizing the prospects of a good marriage. However, many parents still felt minimal education for girls was sufficient, and greater emphasis was placed on socializing girls and preparing them for life in their marital home. Even parents who favored education and could be influenced to delay their daughters' marriagehad to be prepared to tackle community pressure and gossip about their daughters. This in itself is a challenge that many parents are unable to overcome, ultimately succumbing to marrying their daughters' early. In many respects, the trade off between education and marriage for girls is a function of the broader demand and supply for young girls for marriage. Groom's families largely prefer younger girls for marriage, and few desire older more educated girls.

Both parents and girls in the three study sites reported that trends had changed and were continuing to change around the education of girls and their age of marriage. They reported that many parents were more likely to support the education of girls now than in the past, at least through part or all of secondary school. This was in part due to changing norms on how girls are valued. For example, girls and parents said that potential grooms and their parents now found girls with a secondary school level of education more attractive than less educated girls. Parents and girls also reported changes in how early marriage was perceived in their communities, and indicated that more parents were willing to delay girls' marriages to a later age than in the past. Some girls themselves were aware that early marriage came with negative consequences and a few indicated that they would communicate their desire to marry at a later age to their parents should marriage negotiations start too early. Some parents are also seeking direct or indirect input from girls, though they continue to make final decisions. Girls themselves have their own hopes about their age of marriage, and the attributes of their future husbands and marital homes,

but in reality have only limited or no influence on decisions that determine their futures. In contrast, though only a few girls were allowed to pursue education to higher levels, parents reported that girls today have much fewer restrictions than their mothers' time, when attending school at any level, not just higher levels, was uncommon. As a girl from an urban slum in Maharashtra described,

(My mother) was restricted from going out, (she was) not even allowed to go to school. My mother has studied up to 7th standard, but with great difficulty. She had to look after all the siblings and also do household chores. But nowadays we are allowed to go to school.

Fathers in Rajasthan also explained changing attitudes and the easing of restrictions in educating girls:

The situation has changed over the last 10 years. There was a time when girls were not allowed to get an education but now it has changed. Now parents think that their daughters should get educated at least till 8th or 10th standard. (Even the) poorest of the poor nowadays is ready to educate his daughter, though if he is unable to provide for an education it is because of poverty.

Mothers in Maharashtra also explain how things have changed since they were young, and describe their hopes for their daughters:

S.4: Our fathers did not give us freedom. We were not allowed to go to school. I don't think like this, I think my daughter should study.
S 1: What we didn't get in our life our daughter's should get it.
S 2: She should grow well, should take good education. Nowadays boys stay back, girls go ahead. If our daughter takes education then she will go ahead in her life.

Although girls are still often restricted from going to schools outside the village, and though they are expected to conform to strict rules around their dress and behavior, very few other restrictions are placed on girls' educational experience today. Girls are even allowed to go to school during menses, a time when they are normally restricted in other areas of their lives. Parents allow girls a level of freedom in school, such as in socializing with friends, even in some cases boys, that adolescent girls do not have in any other area of their lives.

Thus, in these three study sites, a few girls received the right mix of support, ideas and opportunities to have the confidence to dream bigger and to advocate for those dreams. One such girl, a13 year old from Rajasthan, expressed her aspirations as such:

When I get older and complete my studies, at that time I will get a job as good as any man. I will earn money and I will decide what to do with the money. I will give 85% of my salary to my parents.

DISCUSSION

Variation in experiences and in decision-making indicates opportunities

Adolescence is a life stage in which one begins to explore the opportunities and responsibilities of adulthood under the protection of childhood. It is a time to allow the body to grow into adult form, learn about one's sexuality as it develops, develop one's own opinions and identity separate from parents, make mistakes in a safe environment and make plans for the future. Without adolescence, one misses a critical opportunity to grow – physically as well as in the skills needed for coping with adult duties. Yet girls who are married early irrevocably lose their adolescence, jumping straight from child to adult without adequate time to mature. In South Asia they also lose education, as married girls generally do not attend school.

Despite the large numbers of parents that marry their daughters early in South Asia, this study shows that parents *do* care about their daughters and do invest in them, but within the limitations of their finances, traditional ideas on the roles of women, social norms and consequences of breaking them, and girls' physical safety and the safety of their reputations. Although parents are generally influenced by the same set of factors in making decisions about continuing girls' education or selecting early marriage, girls are not valued in any one way by all parents, and so the decisions they make for their daughters vary. Although menarche leads to the socialization of girls, parents differ in how they impose restrictions on their daughters. As a result, generalizations cannot be made about adolescent girls in South Asia, as their experiences vary widely even within the boundaries of their cultures. While some parents strictly limit girls' opportunities, others flaunt social norms to give daughters a chance to explore new prospects, and many range somewhere in the middle.

The variation seen across the three sites shows that while overall there are important similarities in the dialogue around marriage and education, there is a gradient across sites. Families in Bangladesh appear to be the most conservative of the three, and this is exemplified by the lack of girls in this sample entering secondary school, and by their inability to even discuss marriage. By contrast, families in Maharashtra appear to be the most progressive of the sites, and here some girls are able to negotiate for more education, provide some input on the decisions around their marriage, and in some cases delay marriage. Rajasthan falls in the middle, where families in some respects are extremely conservative while in others they are quite progressive.

The range of decisions parents make about girls' futures indicates that there is need as well as opportunity for interventions to work with parents and girls in delaying marriage and promoting education or employment. However multiple types of interventions are needed to reach different groups of parents – those who are willing to pursue new opportunities for their daughters should be supported in accessing these, those with moderate views on opportunities should be supported in delaying marriage until 18 with safe access to schools, and those with more traditional views on sending girls to school and keeping girls in school as long as possible. Tailoring interventions to how parents' value girls and their specific concerns can help parents along a continuum to further invest in daughters.

For example, parents who range in between those who follow existing socio-cultural norms and those who choose more progressive options may be very able to invest further in daughters given the right opportunities, though may not invest as fully as progressive parents. These mid-range parents may not allow girls to attend college or seek employment, but may be willing to delay their daughters' marriages and continue their education up to a certain grade level. Others may not be willing to send daughters to distant schools or employers but may be open to additional school or work they believe are safe and reputable if nearby. These parents may be responsive to programs that address concerns that prevent them from investing in their daughters in new ways.

Even as mid-range parents should be encouraged to advance their daughters further, parents who buck traditional norms should be studied to better understand what enables them to be "positive deviants." These parents choose delayed marriage, higher education and possibly employment for their daughters. Examining and understanding such positive behaviors, as well as barriers among parents not exhibiting these behaviors, can inform programming that supports investing in alternative futures for girls and suggest ways in which to shift how girls are valued within communities.

Trading education for marriage requires changing how girls are valued

Although many parents in South Asia tend to view girls' education positively, it is valued by many only up to a certain grade level and predominantly in its ability to attract suitors and in helping girls gain skills to cope with marital problems. Very few parents perceive that girls could have roles other than within marriage. Parents and girls often do not have any role models of women pursuing higher education or careers to help them envision what else girls could do within and outside of marriage. Though parents are slowly being exposed to new paths for girls – from examples on television or in the community for instance – education is not yet at a tipping point in many families to lead to risking their own daughters' reputation or marriage prospects, or the reputation of the family.

Parents restrict girls in part to protect them, and thus any relaxation in restrictions must come in an environment that is safe for girls. For girls to have access to greater mobility, parents must know that their daughters are in an environment safe from eve teasing and possible sexual exploitation. They must know that school is nearby and that the road to school is safe. They must know that employment will not put girls at risk of sexual harassment or rape. Thus empowering girls must be accompanied by safe access and transport to nearby schools. It requires strict policies against sexual harassment and rape that are locally supported and enforced. It must also come with changes in how men value and treat women and girls.

Not only are safe environments needed, gender discrimination often fuels a lack of parental support, a fundamental barrier to girls' education. Gender discrimination in part explains why some parents provide girls with little support for and motivation to pursue further education and do well in school. Girls whose parents do not support them tend to have less interest in school and fewer aspirations around education, as well as are more likely to drop out. Girls aspirations and negotiations for their future goals are heavily influenced by gender-specific expectations for what they "ought" to do with their lives. As long as girls' aspirations are so bound by these

norms, they are likely to simply reflect and thus reinforce and perpetuate structural gender inequality.

Although many girls lacked the self-efficacy needed to develop aspirations reflecting their own interests, as well as face a range of barriers in meeting the aspirations they do develop, findings from this study show that there are opportunities – in the form of care and support from parents, newly available activities such as vocational and life skills, and changing trends around decisions about girls – that can help some girls develop and meet their aspirations. For example, girls with parents who provided more care and support were more likely to be interested in school and pursue further studies. Participation in life skills courses or in vocational classes such as tailoring also exposed girls to new ideas and opportunities that helped them develop future goals. That is, parental encouragement and new skills enabled girls to have the confidence to develop aspirations and advocate for their goals. Also, parents themselves are influenced by these new opportunities, for example by participating in the curriculum development of life skills courses for girls, and begin moving towards more progressive ideas around girls.

Girls report that while they have some or full control over decisions about their education, they have little or no say in decisions about their marriages. Particularly when there is pressure and expectation of marriage looming large for parents, girls have very limited influence on marriage decisions. Yet findings from this study indicate that parents are more likely to support further schooling if girls negotiate for further education. This suggests that there is an opportunity to delay marriage when parents and girls communicate about a girl's future, especially education. Programs that provide girls with life skills to specifically enable communication and negotiation skills among adolescent girls carry the promise of increasing girl's education and delaying marriage. Also, parents in focus group discussions said that girls with a higher education were more likely to be asked for their input and would be better able to influence decisions about their lives.

There is also a need to change how women are valued by helping them become income earners. When girls that are contributing financially to their natal families, girls might be valued for more than their decorum; they could bring honor to their families as skilled, paid workers. Income can help girls gain a voice in decisions about their future. In the marital home, earning income might be valued as well, for example for girls' ability to better care for children, contribute financially, and solve marital and household problems. It can also give married girls decision-making and negotiation power on issues such as sex, family planning and violence.

Not only do girls need to have greater agency and influence on their own life decisions, programs must target parents, family members and the broader community in changing how girls are perceived and valued. Girls are socialized mainly by mothers and other females but socialization is enforced by male family members, elders and the community-at-large. Mothers are often the most restrictive because their daughters' behavior reflects on them and because they have learned to internalize and self-enforce acceptable behavior for women. Thus it is important to work extensively with mothers as socializers, and men and elders as decision-makers. Fathers need to become part of the solution, as often if they can be brought on board,

they are more progressive than mothers and more able to see girls in new roles, buck social norms, and influence decisions.

Parents face numerous pressures to proceed with marriage and have only a few good or widely accepted reasons to continue education for daughters. Marital pressures include poverty and the lower dowry for younger brides; a system in which girls leave parents for marital homes while boys live with and care for parents after marriage; and limited demand from parents of boys for educated, older women as opposed to young, uneducated girls. Parents also do not arrive at decisions on their daughters' marriage in isolation, as extended family and community gatekeepers also play a critical role. Programs need to work to change or alleviate the consequences of these systems, and need to work with boys and parents of boys to change the demand side of early marriage. It is also critical to make education and marriage less of a trade-off by promoting education even after marriage. Such programs will need to work simultaneously at multiple levels to enable broader change – engaging the community-at-large, community gatekeepers, and networks of communities that interact in the marriage market.

Finally, and fundamentally, changing how girls are valued requires targeting programs to change not just household level decision-making, but to change community-level norms and practices that tie decisions about girls to family honor. Media campaigns are one approach to changing community norms around how girls are valued. Edu-tainment – for example, soap operas that paint a positive image of girls in progressive roles and where women and girls are respected – is another approach proven to have a strong impact on existing views of women and girls. While it may seem as though such interventions may take time to bear fruit, these study findings clearly show that community practices and social norms are dynamic processes and at any given time people fall along a continuum. This provides hope and opportunity for rapid change that need not wait for the next generation of girls. Today's girls are ready.

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