



# Tackling Child Marriage and Early Childbearing in India: Lessons from Young Lives

The Government of India has made combatting child marriage and early childbearing a priority. This brief uses data collected from 1,000 19-year-olds in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to help inform policy and programming efforts. In our survey, 28% of girls and just 1% of boys married before the age of 18. By the age of 19, a majority (59%) of married young women had already given birth. Young Lives has been following the lives of these young people and their families since 2002. The information they have shared with us over that time allows us to understand which girls are most likely to marry and have their first child at a young age. Girls who married before the age of 18 were more likely to have left school before 15, and to come from a poorer background. Their parents and caregivers were less likely to be well-educated or to have high aspirations for their daughters. These findings highlight the importance of safe, accessible and high-quality secondary education for girls, and the need for effective social protection and investment in livelihoods and opportunities for young women and men so that families feel confident that they can delay their daughters' marriage and invest in their education and future. Young couples need access to sexual and reproductive health services and information to enable them to delay their first pregnancy and to space their children, although the pressure to have children soon after marriage can be intense.

## Child marriage and early childbearing in India: the context

Childbearing in adolescence substantially increases health risks for young mothers and their babies, and puts pressure on impoverished households. Rates of early childbearing in India are high: in 2012, one in six girls between the age of 15 and 19 had already given birth to their first child (UNICEF 2012).

Underlying these rates is a high prevalence of child marriage. As well as the risks of early childbearing, many young brides have little power in the marital household. Although the mean age of marriage in India is rising, the number of child marriages taking place each year is still extraordinarily high, particularly among the poorest and most socially disadvantaged girls.

In Andhra Pradesh, according to data from the 2015 National Family Health Survey (NHFS-4), a third of women in their early twenties (32.7%) had married before age 18. The survey also found that one in eight young women between 15 and 19 years (11.8%) were pregnant or already mothers at the time of the survey. In Telangana a quarter of young women (25.7%) had married before age 18, and 10.6% of women aged 15 to 19 years were already mothers or pregnant.

## Key findings

- 28% of girls in the Young Lives Older Cohort were married before the age of 18. Only 1% of boys had married before 18 years.
- 59% of married girls had given birth to their first child by the age of 19. All recorded births had happened in wedlock.
- Girls who had left school by age 15 were four times more likely to marry before the age of 18 than girls who were still in school at age 15.
- Girls from the poorest households were twice as likely as girls from the least-poor households to be married before the age of 18.
- Girls whose parents had the lowest educational aspirations for their daughters at age 12 were twice as likely to be married before age 18, compared with girls whose parents had the highest aspirations for them.

## Policy and programme responses

India's national legislative framework has contained a law prescribing a minimum age of marriage since 1929, and a National Strategy Document on the Prevention of Child Marriage was drafted in 2013. Two high-profile national programmes have launched recently: the National Adolescent Health Strategy Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK), and Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP), a programme to address the gender imbalance in sex ratios and child marriage in 100 districts across India.

In 2015, Young Lives undertook a mapping study to look at issues of adolescent reproductive and sexual health, child marriage and early childbearing. In our interviews with stakeholders we found that:

- There are a number of promising interventions, including RKSK, BBBP and programmes supported by civil society organisations
- More effective and better-joined up interventions are needed to address child marriage and early childbearing
- The needs of adolescent girls who are already married are often neglected
- There is a need for further research in order to understand what works – for example:
  - what works in mitigating the impact of child marriage
  - effective interventions in high-prevalence areas
  - the focus of preventive efforts
  - how to challenge social and gender norms and promote the status of girls

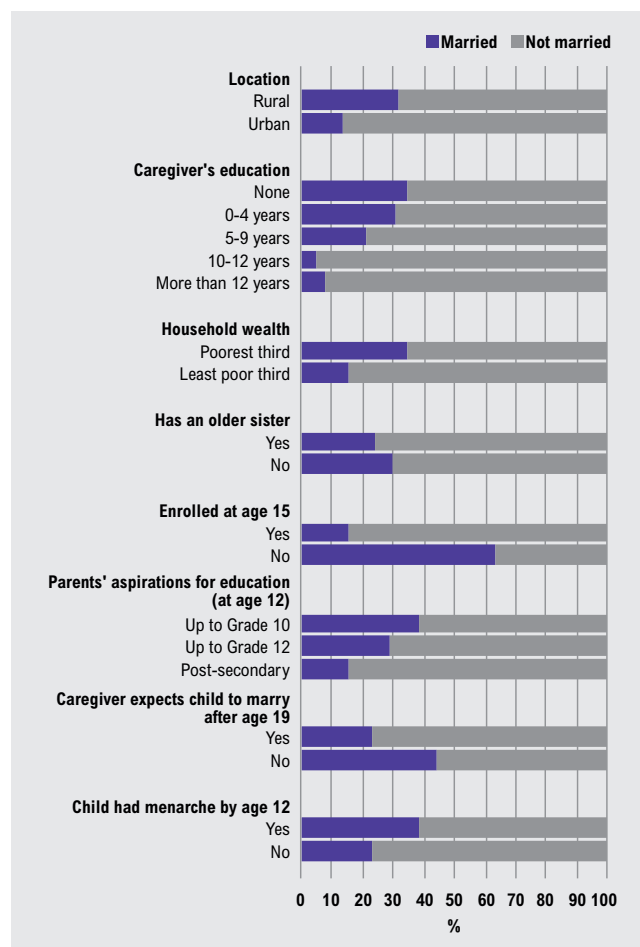
and in particular knowledge areas:

- on younger adolescents (aged 10 to 14 years)
- on adolescent decision-making and concepts of consent
- men and boys' engagement in ending child marriage.

## The evidence: Which girls are most likely to marry before the age of 18?

Before the age of 18, almost 28% of girls in the Young Lives sample were married and only 1% of boys (136 girls and 5 boys). Figure 1 shows the percentage of girls from different social groups who were married by age 18. For example, 32% of girls from rural areas (n=367) were married compared to only 14% of girls from urban areas (n=116).

**Figure 1. Which girls are more likely to be married before age 18?**



### Education

Leaving school early is the most powerful predictor of child marriage. Girls who had left school by age 15 were four times more likely to marry before age 18 than girls who were still enrolled. Gender gaps in enrolment widen during adolescence, so policies which keep girls in school are likely to be linked to delaying marriage.

### Poverty and insecure livelihoods

Poverty and insecurity matter. Girls from the poorest households were twice as likely to be married before age 18 as those from the least poor households. Rural girls were more likely than urban girls to marry young. When money is in short supply, social norms that position daughters as the 'assets' of their future in-laws (*paraya dhan*) can lead poor parents to choose to invest more in their sons'

than their daughters' education. Poverty or ill-health may lead parents to try and protect their daughters financially through marriage, or to marry younger and older daughters at the same time to reduce costs. Data from our in-depth qualitative interviews suggest that girls may regard marriage as an opportunity for escape from heavy work burdens at home.

### ***Aspirations and expectations***

Aspirations are linked to how long girls remain in school and the age they are likely to marry. Girls whose parents had the lowest educational aspirations for them at age 12 were twice as likely to be married before age 18 as girls whose parents had the highest aspirations for their daughters' education. Girls' aspirations do decline during adolescence as the reality of the opportunities available to them become apparent, but our research suggests that both parents' and children's aspirations have a protective role, lessening the chances that girls will marry early.

### ***Caregiver education***

The research shows that caregivers' education is an important factor deciding the education of girls in particular and therefore linked to delayed marriage. 35% of girls whose caregivers had no education were married before age 18, compared to only 5% of those whose caregivers had been at school for between 10 and 12 years. We know that children whose father completed secondary school or above are 2.1 times more likely to complete school than children whose fathers had little or no education (Singh and Mukherjee 2016), highlighting the importance of paternal as well as mothers' education.

### ***Social norms and gender-based birth order***

There appears to be a complex relationship between birth order and child marriage: girls with older sisters and without older brothers are less likely to be married before 18, but girls with an elder brother, who is working and contributing to the family income, tend to get married earlier. A brother who contributes to his sister's dowry may also influence decisions about her marriage. Girls reaching puberty earlier (by age 11 to 12) were more likely to marry early: analysis of the figures suggests early maturity may lead parents to expect their daughter to marry earlier. Our in-depth qualitative research interviews highlight parents' concerns that unmarried girls may engage in pre-marital (sexual) relationships or may be exposed to sexual violence and harassment, and many see child marriage as a means to protect their daughters against these risks.

## **The evidence: Which girls are most likely to give birth by the age of 19?**

59% of married girls in the Young Lives sample had given birth by age 19 (all recorded births had happened in wedlock). The characteristics of girls who have their first child early are very similar to those who marry under the age of 18.

Married young women report considerable pressure to have a child, and few young couples use contraceptives to delay first pregnancy (IIPS/Population Council 2010). Young people reported having very little sexual and reproductive health knowledge before first pregnancy. Social norms that encourage early childbearing are compounded by inequitable access to health and education services.

“If we don't conceive immediately, then they will talk about us and keep taunting us. They will say 'look she has no children', and in this way a finger will be pointed at us.”

Young mother in Rayalaseema

### **Harika's story: Aspiration, reality, and community norms**

Harika is a BC girl from a village in south Telangana. When we interviewed her at age 16 (in 2010) she was at school and living at a girls' hostel in the city and was determined to continue her studies:

“You get better jobs if you study and you have a better life and can marry an educated husband. If your husband is in agriculture, you have to go to the fields and work. If he is educated, you can be happy.”

Her mother said: People scold us asking 'What is the point of educating girls? They will get spoilt'. Her parents had already had marriage proposals for Harika but said that she would not get married for four or five years. "We have given her permission to study and we cannot cut her throat halfway through. She can study as long as she wants to," her mother said.

When our researchers met Harika again in 2014, she was married and eight months pregnant, having earlier had a miscarriage. She had not been able to get into a college with a hostel attached in order to do her Bachelor's degree and her elder brother believed: "It is not good for girls to come and go every day on the bus. Whatever education she had is enough."

Community norms required that her brother should marry in the fifth year after their grandfather's death, and also that Harika should marry before her brother. Harika was married just hours before her brother: the joint wedding reduced the expense of the marriage, and her dowry was paid from the dowry paid by her brother's new wife's family.



## What do our findings mean for policymaking and programmes?

Our evidence indicates that the underlying drivers of child marriage and early childbearing are very similar. Family decisions about marriage are shaped both by gender norms and local practices, worries about the safety and risks to reputation faced by their daughters, and by poverty, education provision, aspirations, as well as the wish to secure a positive future for their children. Unless actions to promote later marriage and childbearing present positive alternatives which take these drivers into account, they are unlikely to be effective.

As well as working with women and girls, our research suggests that effective engagement is needed with boys, men and the wider community, given their important role in decision-making.

Based on Young Lives findings, there are five promising areas for intervention in order to address child marriage and early childbearing:

1. Investment in safe, accessible, girl-friendly and high quality secondary education to assist girls stay in school for longer.
2. Strong and comprehensive social protection systems and support for the poorest households to reduce the financial pressures and economic shocks which lead to families choosing to marry their daughters early.
3. Improved access to economic opportunities for young women, so that staying in school and delaying marriage is worthwhile for girls and their families.
4. Effective interventions with communities and families (including boys and men) to address social norms and to reduce gendered risks so that child marriage is not sought as a means to protect girls from sexual and gender-based violence.
5. Specific support to young married couples, including access to sexual and reproductive health services to enable married adolescent girls and their husbands to delay childbearing.

### REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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