

PERSPECTIVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND THEIR PARENTS IN UNDERSTANDING DRIVERS OF EARLY MARRIAGE

FINDINGS FROM MORE THAN BRIDES ALLIANCE, INDIA

BACKGROUND

The proportion of girls getting married before the age of 18 in India has significantly declined from 47% (2005-06) to 27% (2015-16) (UNICEF, 2018; IIPS and ICF, 2017). Despite this sharp 43 percent reduction in prevalence of child marriage, India is still home to about 1.5 million child brides. Studies in India have found significant regional disparities and socio-economic inequality in child marriage patterns (UNICEF, 2018). Research has also shown that parents continue to exert control over marriage related decisions (Santhya, 2019; Zavier et al., 2019). To date, there has been little site-specific, careful diagnostic research conducted to understand the perspectives of the girls at risk of child marriage and communities in which they live. Such research may help to improve the acceptability and ultimately the effectiveness of interventions in preventing early marriage.

This research brief seeks to fill this gap by describing the situation of adolescent girls in select communities in India, the family and community level influences that encourage early marriage in this context, and the barriers to following an alternative path other than early marriage in this context, as well as by exploring girls' perspectives on how they might build agency in order to more effectively negotiate the timing of their marriages.

METHODS

This research brief is part of an impact evaluation of the More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) project. The MTBA evaluation uses a mixed-method design to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions designed and implemented by local partner organizations aiming to delay marriage and working at multiple levels—individual, family, and community. This brief uses data from focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescent girls and their parents. Topics in discussions with adolescent girls included recognition of safe and unsafe spaces, barriers in continuing education, access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and services, and awareness of child-protection systems and laws.

Discussion groups held with parents addressed parents' expectations for their daughters, preferences for education, work and marriage, views on alternatives to early marriage, among other topics (Pandey et al., 2019). Qualitative data collection was done following MTBA's baseline survey (Basu et al., 2017) to explore in greater depth the community and parental norms around marriage and the contextual factors contributing to early marriage. We conducted the following FGDs:

- a. 10 Focus group discussions (FGDs) with parents of adolescent girls ages 12-19, with mother and father groups conducted separately;
- b. 14 FGDs with adolescent girls ages 12-19 themselves, with separate groups for unmarried girls and for married girls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Education and work are potential alternatives for delaying early marriage although we need to explore other viable alternatives as communities are not equipped to provide higher education and engage girls in income generating activities
- Perceived safety of girls is an important barrier to accessing education and livelihood opportunities. Changing perceptions about girl's safety and creating an environment that enables parents to let their daughters continue education or earn income are key to delaying marriage
- Programs need to focus on removing structural barriers by providing job opportunities locally and making higher education accessible

RESULTS

A majority of girls want to pursue education and marry later but inaccessibility of schools/colleges in their villages and poor economic conditions force them to drop out of school early.

The average number of years of schooling among adolescent girls aged 12-14 years included in this study was 5 years, compared with 8 years for adolescent girls aged 15-19 years. Most of the married girls participating in this study had already dropped out of school. Both girls and their parents acknowledged the unavailability of schools in their villages beyond class 5 or class 8 and parents also noted that schooling is limited for girls because they are not able to allow their daughters to leave their villages to further their studies due to both economic and safety concerns. Poor quality of education and limited future work prospects in these localities also play into parental decision-making concerning sending girls outside of their villages for education: whereas for boys, investments in education are linked to increased prospects for security, parents do not see this same potential benefit for girls.

PRECURSORS OF EARLY MARRIAGE AND KEY BARRIERS IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EDUCATION



Some fathers acknowledged gender differences in decision-making regarding schooling for their children. In families with limited resources, education for boys is seen as a better long-term investment, as girls will leave their natal homes once married.

If there are both boys and girls in a family, then people consider who to teach and who to not. Today girls are living in our home, but after marriage they will go to another house and will not live with us. It is okay whatever they have studied since, after marriage, they will give their earnings to the in-laws' family and not to their parents.

— Fathers of unmarried adolescent girls

Safety concerns restrict girls' mobility and access to livelihood opportunities. Parents also explained they felt that marriage is the best suited option for protecting their adolescent daughters' 'dignity'.

Concerns about sexual security were related to girls' immediate safety and to their future marriage prospects. A group of mothers spoke of concerns including concerns about girls' safety, girls' sexual security, and girls' marriage prospects.

Due to the fear of getting defamed [we marry them at an early age], What we can do? They can make a mistake and things could get messed up. That's why we marry them soon. Maybe she gets spoiled or maybe she gets pregnant or maybe she gets molested by someone. Due to this fear, we marry her early.

—Mother of unmarried adolescent girl

Girls also do not perceive many community spaces to be safe for them and reported that they were not allowed visit certain places in their communities unescorted.

Girls reported feeling safest at their community's well, at the market, and at tutoring centers, which are areas where a lot of women and girls are typically present. Interestingly, home, work, and playgrounds were not included among the safe spaces most frequently mentioned by girls. A group of girls reported that they felt safe going to the temple and to school, largely because they are not alone in these places. The distance to a certain location was also an important factor in the perceived safety of that place.

R1: *The temple is just beside my house, that is why I am not afraid. There are many people around the temple, so I am not afraid to go there.*

R2: *We are not afraid to go to a place because we are with our friends. If there are many people surrounded around us, then we are not afraid.*

R3: *School is safe but the way to the school is not safe. We are afraid to pass that way. Temple is the safest. We can even go there by foot.*

—Unmarried adolescent girls aged 15–19.

'SAFE SPACES' MENTIONED BY ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN FGDS



'UNSAFE SPACES' MENTIONED BY ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN FGDS



A lack of opportunities for vocational training or income generating activities in girls' villages or in nearby communities also creates a barrier to delaying marriage.

According to baseline findings, only 8% of girls have received any vocational training, while about one third of older adolescent girls had ever worked for money (but mostly in labor intensive agricultural work) (Basu, 2017). Discussion groups conducted with parents suggested that poor economic situations forced parents to remove their daughters from school so they could contribute manual labour at farms. In some settings, girls are reportedly not allowed to work outside of the home, even in the case of poor household conditions, and having them married as early as possible is considered a way to reduce the household's economic burden.

A group of mothers discussed how girls mostly work in agriculture, but how this was not considered to be for money but rather to fulfill family obligation:

No, they don't earn money. They go [along] with their parents to their farm. They go with them to others' farms if there is [any] extra work ...they go [along] to help them.

—Mother of unmarried adolescent girls

Though there exist considerable differences among study settings on perceptions related to income generating activities by girls. The lack of opportunities for girls in their community was mentioned by a group of fathers:

I: What kind of work do girls do?

R1: Like paddy plantation, harvesting of paddy, etc. They do all these things.

R2: They also move the bricks. Girls who are poor go to move the bricks.

R3: Here there are no resources. Only this work is here.

R4: There is not any plant or factory, so no one works in factory here.

R5: Here there is not any sewing work, etc.

—Fathers of unmarried adolescent girls

Similarly, girls also recognized the lack of economic opportunities and recommended that delaying marriage could be possible if girls were able to engage in earning activities.

.... the girl will escape from marriage if she is doing some work. If she works and denied for marriage parents also support her as she is earning some money. She can do teaching, nursing or any type of work can be good.

—Unmarried adolescent girl aged 15–19.

CONCLUSIONS

We found that education is seen as an alternative pathway to early marriage by both parents and adolescent girls, however, very few girls in the study settings were able to continue their studies beyond Class 8. The absence of educational facilities beyond this level in these communities illustrates an important structural barrier. Where educational facilities do exist, they are perceived to be too far and unsafe for girls to access. Additionally, financial barriers, combined with safety concerns, limit girls' opportunities for continuing their education at schools outside of their villages. Parental preferences for early marriage in response to sexual security concerns, and girls' limited mobility even within their communities suggests that continuing education outside of home villages is not a viable option for most girls. Findings suggest that creating safe spaces for girls in the community so that they feel secure while going out and learn and build peer network using those places. Having dialogues with stakeholders to create local opportunities for girls to engage in them income-generating activities, and negotiating with parents to let their daughters participate in such activities may create an impact on girls' freedom of movement and ultimately on the timing of their marriages.

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