

Child marriage in India





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Child marriage in India

More than 40 per cent of the world's child marriages take place in India. Almost half of all girls here marry before the age of 18 years; 47 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were married before age 18.¹ Between 1992-93 and 2005-06, the incidence of child marriage in India declined by approximately 7 per cent.² In some states, however, child marriage prevalence still exceeds 60 per cent, with the highest rates found in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh. The problem is worse in rural India as compared to urban areas, with 56 and 29 per cent prevalence respectively.³ The data from the International Centre for Research on Women's 2008 study Knot Ready illustrates the link between child marriage and level of education in India. For example, 77 per cent of those women between the ages of 20 and 24 with no education were married before the age of 18 in 2005-06; the figure is 62 and 27 per cent in the case of those with primary education and secondary or more education respectively.

Under India's Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006, the legal age of marriage for girls is 18 years and for boys it is 21 years. The law mandates punitive measures against all who perform, permit, or promote child marriage.

Study methodology

This study was a field-level exploration conducted to understand the factors contributing to child marriage and examine the impact of Plan's initiatives to address the causes and consequences of early marriage. This chapter presents key findings from India, where the study was conducted in Bikaner district in Rajasthan. The data was collected from both Plan and non-Plan work areas in the district. Qualitative methods were applied to gather information, including in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) with a spectrum of stakeholders. These included married and unmarried young men and women, parents, community leaders and government officials.



Plan India working in partnership with Uttari Rajasthan Milk Union Limited (URMUL) initiated the Kishori Prerna Manch programme in 2001. The project continues the education of girls returning from the Balika Shivar residential education camps with life skills training and helps them create peer support groups. The adolescent girls come together on a monthly basis to discuss the issues related to the overall development of their village, community and their education.

Study findings

This section highlights prevailing norms, perceptions and practices regarding child marriage and its deep-rooted causes. It also discusses cases of positive deviance and highlights the work of Plan India, in partnership with Urmul Setu, in addressing the issue of child marriage through their work in Bikaner district of Rajasthan.

Child marriage continues to be the norm for a majority of girls despite high-level awareness of the legal marrying age.

The study findings demonstrate that child marriage still prevails as a cultural norm in Bikaner, where a majority of girls and many boys are married before they reach their respective legal ages.

“In our society, girls are married off even before they turn 18 years and boys also are married off before 21.”

(Unmarried girl)

Most of the respondents said that marriages often take place when girls are aged between 14 and 16 years of age and extremely few girls are married after they turn 18. The decision to marry the girls is usually made by the girl’s father, or other male members of the family, either through seeking marriage alliances or organising the marriages.

Most of the respondents who shared this information were aware of the legal ages of marriage.

Girls who are married very early may continue to live with their parents and be sent to their marital home after a few years.

The study highlights instances where mostly girls who are married off at 12 to 13 years of age continue to reside with their parents. The girl is only sent to her in-laws house in another village after a few years of marriage. However, in some instances the girl is sent to her marital family immediately after marriage if her in-laws insist upon it. This cultural practice is referred to as Gauna in Bikaner.

“If a girl is small (13 and less) then she is not sent off, but if she is 14-15 years old then she is sent off immediately after marriage. It depends on the in-laws; if they want their daughter-in-law at the time of marriage, then she is sent off immediately.”

(Mother of unmarried girl)

Clear patterns of inter-generational shifts are observed in the age of marriage for girls.

Most of the parents said that girls now are not married below the age of 13 in their village, though it used to be a common practice when they were married themselves.

“We marry a 15 year old girl, and according to us 18 years is old for a girl, so I do not feel that it is right. Our elders used to marry off girls before 13 above that they used to think of it as a sin.”

(Mother of unmarried girl)

Child marriage: Key determinants

The most often stated reasons for child marriages taking place are traditional social norms, gender roles and concern about women's sexuality.

Deeply rooted and ingrained gender norms and role expectations of girls are the most critical contributing factors toward child marriage, most respondents in the qualitative interviews and group discussions said. From the very early stages of their childhood girls are socialised as homemakers and care-providers, and are given training so they can carry out their responsibilities. Girls are expected to fulfill traditional gender roles pertaining to domestic responsibilities and provide care, while boys are expected to take on roles as providers and breadwinners. Even while studying, girls perform numerous household chores ranging from rearing livestock to domestic work and it consumes a majority of their time. This was reported by most of the respondents.

“As I woke up, I tend the cow for milk, then make tea for parents, fill water, clean house and then prepare food... After that I do other household chores in evening.”

(Unmarried girl)

Early marriage is seen as a safety measure and a way of controlling a girl's sexuality.

Marriages in rural areas and villages are organised and arranged by families and communities. There are severe restrictions and punishments placed on self-initiated marriages or sexual conduct. The value attached to chastity and the desire to prevent a girl from losing her virginity before marriage is also extremely high in Bikaner district.

Parents fear that their daughter may do “something wrong” so they marry her off early, as noted by one respondent:

“If she goes out of control then what will happen? We just hope she doesn't embarrass us or disrespect our honour and [bring] shame.”

(Father of married girl)

“Parents feel that if she lives here and marries late she might do something wrong with someone. They feel the girl may become bad and do negative things and go the wrong way. She may spoil the family's name so the daughters are married off early... Parents fear their daughter will do something wrong.”

(Key informant)

Parents continue to link family dignity and honour to women's sexuality. Early marriage is a mechanism for controlling women's sexuality and thereby avoiding any instances of self-initiated alliances/marriages, which are strongly associated with bringing shame to the family.

“Parents marry their daughters to get rid of their responsibilities. They think that their daughter might bring bad name for the family, as they fear that she might elope with someone.”

(Key informant)

In order to ensure that this normative order is adhered to, marriages of boys and girls are organised at a very young age. This is also to prevent premarital sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Control and protection of women’s sexuality defines and protects the family honour.

Other reasons for early marriage include a lack of access to quality education, poverty, the economic cost of marriage and demographic shifts, with fewer girls than boys in the population. Each reason is discussed in more detail below.

Girls are denied access to quality education.

The study findings in Bikaner suggest that most girls complete their primary education, and dropout from schools between grades six and eight. A majority of the respondents said that most girls complete primary education, but few have completed eighth and ninth grades and extremely few girls have completed 10th and beyond.

Parents have not internalised the value of education beyond primary level for girls.

Parents feel that more education will not be very useful for girls as they will be engaged in domestic chores at their in-laws’ house, and therefore it is better to train girls in household responsibilities.

With the aim of involving adolescent girls who have never been to school due to social, economical or other reasons in primary and secondary education, six-months residential Balika Shivirs (Girls’ Education Camps) have been implemented by Plan India and its partners.





“What will a girl do with a job? She has to leave the house and go to another home. She needs to learn to handle household chores, which will help her after marriage since she will be expected to do domestic chores only.”

(FGD adolescent girls)

“It is the thinking of the villagers that if a girl studies till seventh class she is able to read and write, that is sufficient. No one wants their girl to do a job.”

(Key informant)

Investment in a girl’s education is not seen as economically viable.

Parents do not put their scarce economic resources into their daughter’s education as there are no financial incentives to do so. Education beyond eighth grade is often denied and girls are forced to leave school. This was reported by many study respondents, including parents, girls and key informants.

“Parents do not allow their daughters to study since they do not want to spend money on them. They feel girls will go to another house whereas boys will feed their parents, and so boys are educated more.”

(FGD adolescent girls)

There is also a belief that an educated girl with a job will give their income to their in-laws and not to her parents.

“Parents feel that if they educate their daughters then she will get a good job and get married, and so she will earn money for her in-laws, not for them, whereas their son will earn money and bring it home. Therefore parents do not educate girls much and train her to learn household work.”

(Key informant)

In families with fewer economic resources girls are often denied opportunities to study.

“We want our girls to be educated, even they say that they want to study further, but how do we do it? If God allows rains then we have grains to eat and if there are no rains then we just sit like that. We do not have anyone to earn as such. We do not have money for education.”

(Mother of unmarried girl)

Safety and security issues also determine access to education for girls.

Most of the parents interviewed in the study shared concerns regarding the safety and security of their daughters. Their fears have a disproportionate impact on education for girls as compared to boys.

“Girls have to go alone to school which is far, so many parents do not like since it is not safe for girls to move around alone. Men tease girls, and chase girls and pull them in vehicles. Such instances have frightened both girls and her parents. As a result of which girls have also refused to attend schools.”

(Father of unmarried girl)

Even in instances where parents were keen to send their girls to school for secondary and higher education, concerns about the security of the girls coupled with a distant location of the school and transport problems acted as barriers to education.

“We cannot leave girls studying on 10th/11th alone in an unknown place. If she is grown up or working we can leave them alone. Nothing happens to the boy but girls have to be careful. I allowed my son because there were five-six boys with him, I didn't allow him to go there alone. I have fear of these boys who are really naughty; if they tease or say something wrong then we have to think about all that. We get scared of everything, respect and image, yes, because of these reasons we do not send them out alone.”

(Father of unmarried girl)

Alcohol abuse and harassment are issues that parents are most concerned about.

“Parents will not send girls out as they feel drunkard men roam around. There are frequent features in newspapers about crimes. Such things takes place almost every day, in a field if a girl is there, boys tease her... yes, when alone she is teased.”

(Father of unmarried girl)





Availability and accessibility to secondary schools is a big obstacle.

Inadequate infrastructure hinders girls' access to education. In addition, secondary schools are mostly located long distances from homes and parents are worried about sending their daughter to commute, especially in the absence of adequate and regular transport facilities.

“There are not many schools beyond class fifth and for further studies children have to go to Chatargarh village, which is 22 kilometres away from here. Coming and going is 44 kilometres and is a great problem, and staying there is also a problem.”

(Father of married girl)

Government schools have inadequate facilities.

Even in villages where there are schools till 10th standard, absence and lack of teachers also acts as a barrier to girls getting an education.

“There is a problem in the number of teachers; we do not have teachers to teach till the 10th, we have teachers only till the eighth.”

(Key informant)

Absence of female teachers can deter parents from sending their girl to school.

Parents prefer sending their daughters to schools when there is a presence of female teachers.

“People often say that there are no female teachers in the school so we won't allow. Yes, if female teachers are there then girls will be more.”

(Key informant)

Poverty further exacerbates the incidence of child marriage.

Poverty creates vulnerabilities for families at many levels. Since marriage is an expensive affair, with high costs involved buying gifts and food, and travelling, many people living in poverty marry several female relatives to their husbands together in one ceremony.

“The poor families are dependent on the fields and rains for their livelihood. Since last nine years there has been a drought and since last two years output of grains have reduced. There is shortage of food and due to which it has become difficult to marry. But in order to save our honour we have to marry our daughters. Therefore it's quite common here both the eldest daughter and younger daughter are married together.”

(Father of unmarried girl)

These weddings are collectively organised by families living in poverty as a coping strategy and as a cost-saving measure.

“During marriage a lot of give and take takes place, so with collective wedding expenditure is reduced greatly. Money spent on food and gifts are reduced, so instead of giving so many people again and again it is given once and instead of feeding so many people again and again it is done once.”

(Mother of unmarried girl)

As a result of these collective weddings, many girls are forced to marry at a young age, many respondents in Bikaner said.

“I have three daughters aged 17, 15 and 13 and we will marry them off together, but these girls do not want to get married. How do we explain it to them that it is an expensive affair? If someone is doing a job they can afford marriage functions repeatedly. If we do one function, then we can save money.”

(Mother of unmarried girl)

Demographic shifts contribute to child marriages taking place.

Paolo Black for the Young Health Programme



Girls in Bikaner are also married quite early due to the practice of Atta Satta. This practice involves exchanging a daughter for a daughter-in-law, irrespective of a girl's age. Many respondents spoke about this as a growing trend due to a decline in the number of girls relative to boys.

“Nowadays people have started exchange system where a girl is given in a house and a girl is taken in exchange. Nowadays girls are in shortage, so many girls are not there in our society. Mostly it's for this reason, only for exchange.”

(Married girl)

Many families are forced to marry their young daughters, especially in cases where a family is unable to find a bride for their son; they are willing to exchange their daughter in return for a girl from another family.

“If there are fewer girls in a village, then the families exchange their daughters. Sometimes it is done forcefully since the family only gives a daughter in exchange of a daughter-in-law, so whichever daughter is there, she has to get married.”

(Father of unmarried girl)

Birth registration and marriage registration systems

The national government has birth and marriage registration systems in place in Rajasthan; all births and marriages are mandated to be registered by community members. In this study, it was found that while most respondents are aware of birth registration, most parents did not get their child's birth registered at the time of birth.

“Birth registration is done in the school, or the in panchayat office (local elected body), where one can get it done with the gram sewak (village worker). Registration is done but I have not got it done.”

(Father)

Birth registration is becoming common and the reason for it being required is also better known to girls and boys of this generation compared to their parents' generation.

“Yes, I am aware of birth registration. Whether you have a boy or girl, it is necessary to get the birth of the child registered. It is required everywhere even for school admissions and also to verify the age at marriage.”

(Married girl)

Respondents were partially aware of marriage registration and a few had adequate knowledge about the process as well as the benefits. A few respondents (married men and women) also said that they were unaware of the marriage registration system; many respondents did not get their marriage registered.



Role models: Cases of positive deviance

This section discusses the experiences of girls and parents who successfully prevented early marriages and the factors that enabled them to do so. These parents and girls are called role models.

Role model parents

The study looked at role model parents as positive deviant cases who challenged the norm of early marriage and delayed marriage despite facing barriers and community pressures. These role models were found both in Plan programme and non-programme areas.

“After 18 they understand everything when they go to their in-laws house, if we send a small girl she doesn’t understand anything, and her mother-in-law keeps shouting at her.”

(Father of unmarried girl)

These role model parents were progressive in their thinking and challenged the traditional outlook that considers child marriage as inevitable. These role model parents realise the importance and benefits of education.

“If she is educated she will get a job and at least earn money for her own and become independent. This may also influence some people who would want to educate their daughters and let them work. Yes, it will influence educated people and some people who want to change.”

(Father of unmarried girl)

Role model girls

These are girls who think outside the traditional gender roles they are prescribed by the community. They aspire to higher education, jobs and economic independence.

“I want to marry only after I get a job. If I get a good service then I will earn money and I can improve my life and then marry. After marriage it’s not possible to get a job as some people do not allow their daughter-in-law to do service and they are expected to do only household chores. My family told me to get married now but I told them that I want to first get a good job and then marry so now they have agreed.”

(Unmarried girl)

These girls have a supportive family environment, including particularly male relatives such as a father or brother, who can provide both economic and moral support.

“My father says he will make me fill first-year college form. He will sell his three cows in three years and he will take a room in Bikaner for my studies.”

(Unmarried girl)



After Shanti (14) attended a Plan’s supported child rights group, she would be able to escape from her arranged marriage. Now, Shanti enjoys studying in school.



Young girl (16) who is nine months pregnant in Lunkaransar, Rajasthan

Role model girls realise and value the importance of education and are also aware courses and jobs. They have exposure to the outside environment, a social network and aspirations for themselves. As shared by few respondents:

“It is important for women to study; one can stand on one’s feet. A woman can become independent even after marriage; she can educate her children well as well as support others in many ways too.”

(Unmarried girl)

“I want to educate small children. By becoming a teacher, I will get to interact with so many kids every year and I personally like teaching also. I want my in-laws to be considerate enough to let me complete my studies and support me to become a teacher.”

(Unmarried girl)

These cases demonstrate that the girls have thought about their education and career. They also exert influence on their parents’ decisions regarding their education and to their marriage to some extent.

“Yes, I want to continue my studies after marriage. Yes, I do worry about this, I worry about the family, what kind of family will I get. I worry about my husband. He shouldn’t be illiterate or an alcoholic. Yes, I feel like meeting him once before marrying. I will ask him whether he will allow me to study or not. If he does not allow me to study then I will not want to marry you.”

(Unmarried girl)

The effectiveness of Plan's programme in India

Plan India does not have a specific programme on child marriage but it is included under broader child protection programmes. In Rajasthan, the programme supported by Plan, in collaboration with Urmul Setu, organises residential education camps (Balika Shivar, BS) for girls who have dropped out of school or never enrolled. These camps are bridging programmes that help participants enrol in school after the completion of the programme. Urmul Setu has been running BS in the Lunkaransar block of Bikaner. The aim is to advance the education of adolescent girls. The BS began in 1998 to help adolescent girls complete their education up to the fifth grade, and prepare them to re-enter mainstream educational institutes. Currently Urmul conduct classes to prepare girls for 10th and 12th grades because many schools have now been established for primary and secondary education.

The direct effect of these residential camps on child marriage is difficult to measure since the central focus of the programme is directed towards promoting education and awareness raising. Some cases of girls who attended these residential camps however illustrate that increasing education results in delaying age at marriage by a few years, if not eliminating the practice of child marriage.

The interviews conducted with girls, parents, teachers and administrators at the BS throws light on the barriers faced by girls to receiving quality education in Rajasthan and demonstrates how the camps are useful in promoting education and overcoming some challenges faced by girls and their parents.

"After completing my eighth standard from village school I left my studies. I was not allowed to step out of my house as my parents disallowed me. Today, if Shivar wasn't there then I couldn't have completed my further studies and would have been only an eighth pass. I came here and did my 10th standard."

(Key informant)

BS ensure regular attendance and participation of girls in educational and extra-curricular activities. Since they are residential camps, they allowed girls to focus and prioritise their time towards studies, with no additional domestic responsibilities.



BS also provide a secure and safe environment for girls. They are looked upon as safe spaces with female teachers and many parents were convinced it was beneficial to send their girls here. As noted by one member of the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI):

“Parents feel that their girls are safe in shibirs. After visiting at the shibir once or twice, they were satisfied with the conditions. Also picking and dropping is no problem so they send.”

(PRI member)

Most importantly, BS give girls exposure to an open environment, as opposed to the closed and restricted environments to which they are used to. Keeping girls in BS changes their normative environment and lets them develop their interpersonal skills and social capital so they increase their awareness of opportunities outside marriage.

“Earlier I used to think that studying till eighth grade is enough for me and I won’t study after that but now I want to study further and want to become a teacher.”

(BS attendee)

“When I came here for the first time I didn’t know how to behave with my friends. So, after staying here I learned how to love and behave with my friends and classmates and how to dress up. I also learned how to talk to people both men and women, after coming here.”

(BS attendee)

“I completed my fifth standard from my village school and after that I came to Shivir to study my eighth standard. If I would have not come here then my further studies was impossible. I had no interest in studying further.”

(BS attendee)





Plan/Bernice Wong

Girls studying at BS in Lunkaransar, Bikaner district, Rajasthan

Plan India supports young women getting jobs in BS, several respondents said. In addition to BS, Plan also supports community-based organisations of children, more popularly known as Bal Manch and Kishori Prerna Manch (KPM). Girls are empowered through education and vocational training in skills such as sewing and computer knowledge.

“Every village has a Bal Manch, Bal club and KPM and there are around 75 girls in this children’s club (Bal Manch). These girls (in small groups) visit families with girls who are less or not educated. These Bal Manch members spread awareness and advocate with family members for girls education and also for their enrolment in schools and participation in Urmul camps.”

Children’s clubs provides a forum to discuss various problems faced by girls in the community. As shared by a girl participant of KPM:

“Every month the fieldworker (karyakarta) would attend children’s club meeting to discuss education related problems. For example, once we kept a problem of absence of a lady teacher in the school, lack of rooms in schools etc.”

The children’s organisations facilitated by Plan also allow children to develop confidence, learn negotiation skills and assert themselves. There were also just a few reported instances where girls used or intended to use a child helpline to prevent child marriage.

“I will try to talk to her parents and then ask my parents to convince them. If even then nothing happens then I will call on the child helpline number.”

(Married girl)

Conclusions

The study findings affirm that early marriage is still the norm in the Bikaner district of Rajasthan. Reasons for the prevalence include traditional gender norms and role expectations of girls, a wish to control girls' sexuality, adverse sex ratios, poverty and an absence of quality education.

The study provides clear evidence of the use of having a multi-pronged approach to systematically address the issue of child marriage. Findings from this study also confirm that obtaining a quality education is not only an effective strategy for delaying early marriage, but it also leads to the empowerment of girls. However, a lack of access to a quality education is another concern shared by study participants. Concerted efforts should be made towards reinforcing the importance and relevance of education for the holistic development of the child and also for strengthening infrastructure. This should include provision of water, sanitation and health facilities in schools, presence of women teachers, and adequate schools for secondary and high education, provision for girls' hostels in places where schools are located very far and safe transport facilities.

Study participants had a high awareness of the legal age of marriage. The law however is extensively flouted and penal action is rarely taken. It is imperative to stringently enforce the law so that the local government and administration sends out a clear message of zero tolerance towards child marriage to the communities.

Lastly, and the most critically, child marriage prevention should be a recommendation to consider, and not a secondary or tertiary goal included under other educational and health initiatives.



Endnotes

- 1 Indian National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 3 (2005-2006)
- 2 NFHS 1 (1992-93) data shows 54.2 per cent girls were married before their legal age; NFHS 2 (1998-99) data shows 50 per cent of girls were married before age 18.
- 3 (UNICEF, 2009)



“It is important for women to study; one can stand on one’s feet. A woman can become independent even after marriage; she can educate her children well as well as support others in many ways too.”

Unmarried girl



Plan



BECAUSE I am a Girl

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