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Factors Contributing to Early Marriage of Girls in India

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Abstract

Objective: In many developing countries early age marriage is associated with early age pregnancy resulting in mortality and morbidity of mothers and babies. Early marriage before age 18 is common practice in India, more in certain states than others. Uttar Pradesh is one state where early marriage is very common. This study aimed to identify factors that predicted the early marriage of girls from urban slums of Allahabad, which is the sixth largest city in Uttar Pradesh and one of the poorest states.

Methods: As one component of a community intervention, young women aged 14 to 19 were interviewed in household surveys conducted in poor urban localities. Interviews were completed with 1351 adolescent girls. Data allowed us to calculate the cumulative proportion of girls marrying before the legal age of marriage: age 18 for girls.

Results: Pace of marriage was 16.8 percent girls. Multivariate cox regression was used to identify protective factors that helped girls survive the event of marriage. Significant predictors of a younger age marriage of girls included lack of high school education, parent's low education, not living with both parents, and higher restrictions on mobility after controlling for other influences.

Conclusions: Encouraging high school or higher education of girls, skills for negotiating access to education and attitudes preferring late age marriage should each be investigated as possible intervention targets preventing early age marriage of girls in India.

Keywords: Early Marriage; Social Skills; Self-esteem.

Introduction

Adolescents are rarely considered a distinct group with special needs, and so much of the information is recent and exploratory. It is a developmental stage with a lot of transitions and changes. For many girls in India, marriage is an added factor that limits their adolescence and ends in a quick transition to adult roles. This transition has the associated risks of early pregnancy and childbirth. Young women who have not achieved full physical maturity are nearly three times more likely to die of complications in childbirth (WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF 1989). Research that separates the effect of pre-existing factors from those that are due to the timing of the first birth itself is scarce (Singh 1998). However, children born to teenage mothers tend to have worse outcomes with elevated rates of pre-maturity and low birth weight (WHO 1989, Kramer 1987, Miller 1993, IIPS and ICF 2017) and poorer developmental prospects in childhood and adolescence (Fergusson, Horwood and Lynskey, 1994; WHO 1989). Age-specific fertility rates in the five-year period before the national family health survey, 2016 increased from 56 births per 1,000 women to 187 births per 1,000 women age 20-24 and declined thereafter (IIPS and ICF, 2017). Pregnancy before age 18 poses high risk of maternal and infant

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mortality (Rustein 2002. Sebastian, Khan, Kumari & Idnani 2012, Setty-Venugopal & Upadhyay 2002, Whitworth 2002, WHO 2005).

Marriage occurs in adolescence to a large percentage of girls in India (Basu, Acharya, Melnikas, and Amin 2017). The median age at first marriage is 19 years among women age 20-49 and 24.5 years among men age 25-49. Forty percent of women age 20-49 marry before the legal minimum age of 18 years (IIPS and ICF, 2017). Even when there is marginal increase in the average age at marriage, there has not been parallel increase in the time elapsed between marriage and first birth (Mensch, Bruce, and Greene 1998). Girls face social and familial pressure for childbearing soon after marriage to prove their fertility and it also improves their status in the marital household. Twenty percent of women age 15-19 with no schooling have already begun childbearing, compared with only 4 percent of women who had 12 or more years of schooling (IIPS and ICF, 2017). This paper takes a close look at patterns and covariates of early marriage of young women from poor households in urban areas of one of the most populous and poor states of India.

Methods

The data used in this paper comes from a census of the adolescents living in 14 urban slums of Allahabad, India. Thus researchers were able to examine marriage behavior in relation to the individual and family background of young people. The surveys were completed by field investigators through face to face interviews with respondents. Ethics approval was provided by the Institutional review board of Population Council, New York. All the adolescents and their parents gave informed consent before being interviewed. Information was gathered on diverse issues including education, employment and savings, reproductive health knowledge, self-esteem, self-efficacy, mobility and marriage. The household roster identified 7,572 eligible young people (boys and girls), of whom 6,148 completed the survey. Of the 3,862 girls identified, 3,075 completed the interview- a response rate of 80 percent.

Measures

Early marriage was defined as marriages before age 18.

To identify factors associated with girls' early age marriage, items were identified from the survey. Questions were asked about 'age of marriage', 'age considered as the right age of marriage', whether the girls were currently attending school or had completed high school, and religion. In addition, questions about whether the girl was living with both parents, the girls' self-rated social skills and self-esteem, and social skills for negotiating access to school were available.

Level of education was divided into two categories with low education defined as no or pre-high school education only and high education as high school or higher.

Social Skills were assessed with nine items. Two of the items (express your ideas to others, convince others of what you believe in) were scored based on three response options "never, sometimes, most of the time".

Seven other items (taking care of your health, solving your daily problems, making yourself understood to other people, listening to other people, cooperating with other people, asserting your opinions about issues, initiating activities in a group) were scored based on three response options "not good, good, very good". The Cronbach's alpha for the scale formed from these items was 0.69.

The items assessing *Self-esteem* were "you feel important to your family as other members, you feel important to your friends, in a family discussion parents respect your opinion, you feel you have many good attributes, parents/in-laws feel you have many good qualities, capable of doing things like others, and you feel you are important to your friends" using three response options -"disagree, neutral, agree". Cronbach's alpha for the scale formed from these items was 0.73

Statistical Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using SPSS. Life table analyses was used to establish the probable age of marriage after controlling for respondent's current age.

Cox regression was used to model predictors of age of marriage after controlling for the influence of respondents age at that stage and the probability of being married.

Cox regressions were run for each of the predictors to establish the unadjusted (univariate) relationships to early marriage. The predictors that were examined included attitude to late marriage, level of schooling, higher levels of social skills and self-esteem. Finally multivariate models were run to establish effects adjusted for other predictors.

Results

Majority of the girls were either 15 or 16 years old. 88% were Hindus. Few of the girls were already married (14%).

Pace of marriage was estimated by the life-table method. As age increased chances of girls getting married also increased. Hence survival analysis was conducted after adjusting for current age. Figure 1 shows the cumulative percentage of those married at different ages. The marriages at different ages steadily increased in India. The proportions married significantly increased after age 17, peaking at age 19, the highest age for which data was collected.

The effects of year of birth, level of education, religion, living with both parents, self-esteem, and social skills on the age-specific probabilities of marriage were estimated using Cox regression (Cox, 1972). The relative risk of 1 indicates no risk at all. Relative risk less than 1 indicates the protective influence of the factor in slowing the pace of marriage. The relative risk of greater than 1 indicates that the associated factors increases probability of marrying early. Both unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios are shown in the Table 2. Unadjusted odds ratio is based on a single Cox regression for each predictor variable. Adjusted odds ratio is calculated after including all the predictor variables in the regression equation.

Table 1: Background Information

Background Indicators	N (Percent)
Age	
15-16 years	1599 (52)
17-19 years	1476 (48)
Married	440 (14.3)
Religion	
Hindus	2715 (88.3)
Muslims	304 (9.9)
Other religious groups	56 (1.8)
Education	
None/primary	1046 (34)
More than primary education	2029 (66)

Table 2: Odds Ratio (and 95% confidence intervals) from Cox Regression

Co-vari ates	Unadjusted Odds Ratio (Confidence Interval)	Adjusted Odds Ratio (Confidence Interval)
Schooling	0.32* (0.26 - 0.40)	0.66* (0.52 – 0.85)
Ideal age of marriage	0.80* (0.75 - 0.86)	0.82* (0.75 – 0.88)
School social skills	0.83* (0.80 – 0.87)	0.92* (0.88- 0.97)
Social skills	0.39* (0.16 – 0.98)	0.97 (0.38 – 2.48)
Self esteem	0.78 (0.44 – 1.38)	1.37 (0.63 – 2.95)
Living with both parents	0.11* (0.09- 0.14)	0.14* (0.11- 0.18)
Muslim religion	1.4* (1.0 – 1.95)	1.3 (0.93 – 1.91)

*p<0.05

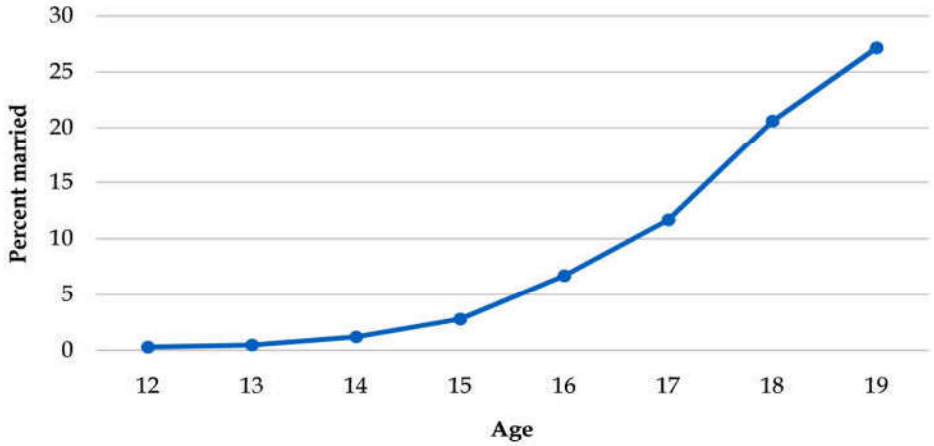

Fig. 1: Estimated cumulative percentage of girls married by specific ages

Level of education has a large effect on pace of marriage. The relative risk associated with schooling is less than 1 and is significant both in the adjusted and unadjusted models. Schooling continued to exert protective influence in delaying marriage even in the adjusted model.

Those appraising themselves to have higher levels of social skills were less likely to marry early than those low in social skills. Additionally in the adjusted model those rating their skills to be good for negotiating schooling opportunities were less likely to marry early than those low in such skills (adjusted odds ratio, 0.92, Table 2). However self-esteem did not emerge as a significant predictor either in the adjusted or unadjusted model.

Living with both parents was more protective than schooling (adjusted odds ratio, 0.14, Table 2). Unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios were similar and highly significant.

Although early marriages occur frequently among women, the respondents did not consider that as the ideal situation. Girls who responded that marriage should occur at a later age tended to marry later than those who believed in early marriage. Surprisingly, most of those who have had an early marriage reported a young age closer to their age of marriage as the ideal age for marriage. Such a belief is either required in accepting their marital state or it could be the result of not experiencing what it is like being unmarried at young ages.

Discussion

Correlates of early age marriage were examined in a sample of girls aged 15 to 19 from poor slums in India. Marriage at an earlier age was found to be less likely where girls had higher levels of education, were living with both parents, believed that marriage should occur at a later age or had better social skills to negotiate educational opportunities. The tendency for education to associate with lower rates of early marriage is consistent with previous research (Basu 1996, Das and Dey 1998, Choe, Thapa and Achmad 2001).

Government efforts in introducing free schooling for girls, offering Secondary School Scholarship, and rations to families as part of mid-day meal scheme have succeeded in increasing enrolment in formal schooling, retention and attendance in schools in India (Kartik 2013).

Poverty has implication on timing of marriage with the dowry demands making marriages a financial burden (Basu, Acharya, Melnikas, and Amin 2017). An analysis of the marriage change in South India in early 1980s showed that parents are unwilling to postpone marriage beyond teenage because of the increased dowry cost for older brides (Caldwell et al 1983).

Once the father is deceased and the mother has to manage the expenses of the household, the onus of finding a suitable groom who does not demand huge pot of money as dowry becomes an arduous task. Hence the risk of an early marriage is central. With the decrease in maternal mortality, presence of widowers has decreased, pushing the availability of suitable grooms further down. So it is not surprising that parents compete for the eligible men by paying higher dowries. Hence Bhat and Halli (1999) argue that it is not education, but marriage squeeze that has led to the rise in age at marriage. Marriage squeeze can also lead to parents opting for young age marriage of their daughters (Sautmann 2010).

The findings from the present study may have policy implications in emphasizing that the role of skills for negotiating access to schooling may operate to reduce early marriage independently of other factors.

The underlying relationship modeled in the regression findings is likely to be interactive and reciprocal with skills for interpersonal interaction, skills for interacting with teachers and elders being both determining and determined by access to school education (Furnham and Stacey 1991). Previous research has provided different models suggesting how education and individual social skills may be related to late marriage (Balk 1994; CEDPA, 2001).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the late marriage is associated with higher levels of education and attitudes unfavorable to early marriage. Findings also provided some evidence that efforts to create less favorable attitudes and practices toward early age marriage through formal programs supported by the schools may be at odds with traditional values emphasized in some less educated families and religious groups. Laws restricting child marriage and accepting dowry in India are one of the best in world, but the menace of dowry goes on increasing and child marriages still continue openly. Higher levels of education and improving social skills necessary for bargaining for higher education and late marriage seem to work in favor of late marriage.

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