

Center of Excellence on Adolescents and Youth

# *Child Marriage & Early Motherhood*

*Understandings from Lived Experiences of  
Young People*

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October, 2015



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Cover designed by Mukund Sawant. The illustration on the cover of this report is a Madhubani painting. Madhubani painting originated in a small region called Maithili around Bihar. The womenfolk of this region drew the paintings on the walls of their homes as an illustration of their thoughts, hopes and dreams.

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## Message

New York, September 2015 at the General Assembly, global leaders made the promise to young people to eliminate harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage, and pledged support to enable young girls and boys to reach their full potential.

India being home to the largest cohort of adolescents and youth in the world, has a historic opportunity and an imperative to invest in and enable young people to become the drivers of a more inclusive, sustainable, rights based and gender equal development agenda at all levels.

Child marriage and early pregnancies are significant obstacles for adolescents to reach their full potential. Child marriage occurs in a complex web of social, economic and cultural factors in which the rights of adolescent girls and boys are often violated. Girls who are married early are most likely to drop out of school and discontinue formal education. They are also likely to be pushed into early childbearing, which increases the risk of maternal mortality, morbidity and infant death. Furthermore, girls who are married early also experience low levels of decision making within the family, increased vulnerability to violence and limited access to social and economic resources.

The voices of girls and community members captured in this study reaffirm that families often perceive girls as a liability and rely on child marriage as a means for dealing with the pressures of dowry, and the perceived need to control the sexuality of young people. The study also captures many instances of depression and psycho-social problems arising out of child marriage and early motherhood.

UNFPA globally and in India is committed to addressing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in a systematic and holistic manner by facilitating joint efforts across all stakeholders including the government, development partners, civil society organizations, academia, the private sector and particularly adolescents and youth themselves.

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to all those engaged in this inclusive field research project led by Prof. S. Parasuraman and Dr. Nishi Mitra that has culminated in this research paper of the Center of Excellence on Adolescents and Youth entitled “Child Marriage and Early Motherhood.”

My special thanks also go to the Department for International Development (DFID) and UNICEF for extending support to the study and for the organization of the Conference on Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in commemoration of the International Day for the Girl Child.

Frederika Meijer

Representative, India & Country Director, Bhutan



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Thank you.

Nishi Mitra  
Mumbai  
October 2015

S Parasuraman

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## Executive Summary

Child marriages in India are common despite the practice being illegal. Child marriages enjoy cultural and social legitimacy and continue to be practiced as private affairs of the family when in fact these constitute human rights violation of children.

There is a growing body of professional and technical literature on the issue that has examined trends, magnitude, causes, impacts and effective responses, yet there are few studies that have attempted to understand it from the human rights perspective and the adolescent's perspective. Impact of these marriages on lives of children and adolescents need to be understood holistically so that suitable interventions from the point of view of children and youth may be designed

Child marriages are explained in existing literature through role of tradition, poverty and lack of education. However the problem needs to be understood in terms of patriarchal mindsets that see girl child as a burden and youth sexuality as a problem that may be handled through repression or child marriage. There is a complex interplay of iniquitous structures that discriminate and subordinate girls and women, poverty, lack of economic options and lack of consciousness or sensitivity to the issue as a human rights concern.

This research used an exploratory, qualitative, partially structured approach through life histories, focused group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews to study the phenomena of child marriage and early motherhood from the perspective of young people. The objectives of the research were to capture lived experiences of young people; document their vulnerabilities and aspirations; explore intersections of child marriage with social structures of caste, class, religion etc.; understand customary practices such as consanguine marriages, levirate and sororate, marriages of exchange, and marriages by kidnapping, elopement, etc. that lend legitimacy to early marriage in particular social-cultural contexts. We also attempted to explore changing perceptions and practices of individuals, groups and communities and to understand young people as agents of change in altering the norm and practice of child marriage.

Life stories of 42 girls/women and 15 boys/men who were married before the age of 18 years and are presently in the age group 15-29 years, form the core of our data. Also focus group discussions from a cross-section of society bring in community based understandings on the issue.

The study was conducted in select districts and villages of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Rajasthan and West Bengal. A proportionate sample was selected from all of these states. The selection of states was done purposively, keeping in mind representation of some high and a few low prevalence States/Districts; States with low gender development indices; States with tribal populations and communities with specific cultural practices/forms of marriage such as marriage by kidnapping or elopement, consanguine, polygamous and levirate marriages and marriages linked to trafficking etc. were chosen to understand the diversity and complexity of the problem in sub-national populations.

The Study is presented in two documents: The main report titled (1) Child Marriage and Early Motherhood: Understandings from Lived Experiences of Young People, and a complementary reference document titled (2) Child Marriage and Early Motherhood: Life Stories of Young People.

The legal age for marriage in India, drawn from the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, sets the legal age for men at 21 and for women at 18. All research participants were aware of this legal

stipulation yet there was widespread irreverence to this law in rural India. Participants in their life stories emphasized factors like puberty, sexual maturity, romance, dropping out from school due to non interest, physical and mental maturity of individuals, family contexts, economic independence especially of boys, and maturity of girls in terms of readiness to handle familial responsibilities as important considerations in defining appropriate age for marriage. Compulsory marriage seems to be the central theme shaping the lives of young people. In rural India, 'no marriage' after 20-21 years of age was expressed to cause concern that it may be due to some fault in the family or person concerned.

The idea of marriage as punishment and a disciplinary exercise against 'bad girls' was articulated in women's narratives where marriage and schooling were seen in oppositional terms. So if a girl drops out of school, she needs to be married. Further, 'bad' was used to refer to girls who were sexually active or engaged in pre-marital relationship/s with boys. Boys also talked of marriages to discipline them and make them responsible.

Many customary forms of marriage practices that encourage and legitimize child marriage despite legal sanctions were found to be practiced even today. Traditional kinship and religious networks show enduring patterns wherein there is complicity of families and communities in outdated, harmful patriarchal practices that are considered integral to a community's identity and its recreation. Marriages of exchange such as *aata-saata*, group marriages such as marriages on the occasion of *Akha Teej* in Rajasthan or temple marriages referred to as *Dham* marriages in Bihar, consanguine marriages, levirate and sororate marriages etc. are regularly practiced in various parts of the country without recognizing non-consent in marriage as a human rights violation. Beliefs about greater marital stability in such marriages, or reduced burden of dowry and expectation of greater protection for girls from ill treatment or violence in strange homes are extended as logic for such marriages being 'good'. People voiced parental fear of transgression of sexuality norms by adolescents as a strong reason for such marital arrangements in childhood. Many children are bartered in these arrangements which contribute to the instrumentalization and subordination of girls and women. Early marriage coupled with delayed *gauna* (transfer of girl from natal home to marital home) is argued to reduce the impact of child marriage in some cases but in our study we found that the *gauna* does not always happen after attainment of puberty and depends in some cases on the need of household labour in the marital home.

Marriage by purchase and marriages as a cover for trafficking also emerged in our study. We also found instances where child marriages were consequences of 'choice' by adolescents in an attempt to assert their agency over parental control. Instances of marriage by elopement among tribals and runaway marriages at temples like *Kali-Bari* in West Bengal show that customary forms of marriages are not always forced marriages. Young people in our study talked of being compelled to marry due to their adolescent love, parental interference in their romantic lives and fear of being forced to marry somebody of their parent's choice if they delayed marriage out of their own volition. Unpleasant conditions of natal home, restrictions on mobility, autonomy and conflict within the family and per-marital pregnancy were mentioned as causes by both young men and women for favouring child marriage.

Rising dowry and bride price amounts were also mentioned to compel young boys and girls to elope and parents to choose to marry girls young when dowry demands are less. Interestingly it is reported that even in communities where bride price was traditionally not practiced, older men have started paying bride price for marrying young adolescent girls, compelling young people to anticipate and make choices themselves through elopement.



Limited education and employment opportunities were reported widely by men and women to be some of the biggest restrictions imposed on their life due to child marriage. Girls and boys exposed to child marriage talked of chronic and extreme poverty and lack of possibilities to change this. Apart from cultural reasons, limited opportunities for girls' secondary education in their villages, lack of options to translate education into livelihoods, coupled with fear of sexual victimization outside of homes makes for additional social disadvantages for girls as compared to boys who are victims of child marriage. Women who lack in skills and education due to child marriage remain marginal and sidelined in household decision making.

Child brides complained of malnutrition and weakness due to early and repetitive pregnancies, abortions and complications in pregnancies, lack of knowledge of contraceptives or agency to use them. They also reported pressure to give birth to children soon after marriage and pressure to give birth specifically to male children. More than half the girls/ women interviewed for their life stories reported physical, psychological and sexual abuse on a routine basis. Young women married as children reported mistreatment by in-laws, depression, anxiety, lack of confidence and a suffocation of their dreams and any sense of self. Informants also reported high levels of restrictions on them in their marital homes.

Girls /women complained of lack of opportunities in the rural economy. They expressed aspirations for skill development and opportunity to work in community based organizations and small scale enterprises to improve their family's economic conditions. Child marriage and the compulsions of sustaining a family were specially articulated by men to have jeopardized their future due to break in education and lack of employability. However life stories of men show them to have more familial support than women to pursue their education and employment goals.

Young people who were married before the age of 18 stressed that they would prioritize education over marriage for their own children and talked about the importance of consent in decisions related to a life partner. Both men and women showed aspirations for personal development and better economic opportunities, access to loans and training in professional courses for up gradation of skills. An emerging progressive view was found in our discussions with informants who underscored the importance of continuing education post marriage, importance of parental support to girl's education, their own empowerment being associated with collectives and the need to enforce the provisions of legislation against Child Marriage.

To conclude, in terms of our learning from life histories it is important that interventions should be designed so as to address a life cycle perspective towards victims/ survivors of child marriage. Our study points to three critical drivers of child marriage: (1) traditions, norms and beliefs including customary forms of marriage, (2) poverty and economy of scale, and (3) resistance and exercise of 'choice' by adolescents who marry (e.g. by elopement) to defy parental and community structures.

Community awareness and counseling for parents is necessary to address lack of sensitivity to the impact of child marriages on adolescents and youth. Successful implementation of PCMA 2006 requires community conscientization and community ownership of the legal provisions. This should be attempted through a responsive monitoring and evaluation system, punitive measures if needed against those complicit in it through negligence and lackadaisical attitude and conscientisation of teachers, government functionaries, ASHA workers, the Panchayat, police and religious leaders.

Since early marriages are also an economic strategy of families where girls are perceived as burdens more investment in girl's secondary education, skill development and employability needs to be targeted. Residential schools and hostels were recommended by the informants to be highly successful in concretely addressing the problem.

Lastly, so called marriages of ‘choice’ by adolescents are very often marriages that are forced on our young children due to non- understanding attitudes of parents and society to natural sexual orientations of adolescents. Life stories reveal many young people to admit that they regret their elopement and early marriage and need a chance to bounce back. They admit being non-prepared to handle the challenges of marriage which had at one time seemed right. Societal attitudes to youth and adolescent sexuality need rethinking as channeling youth sexuality into child marriage is not a solution but a problem. There is a need also for sexuality education and life skills training so that adolescents may be more self-confident and make rational and safe choices.

In conclusion, while it is true that we need to develop a culture sensitive approach to the deep rooted problem of child marriages that has its roots not only in tradition and poverty but in continuing gender inequalities in Indian society, it is needed that we do so understanding our responsibility to ensure rights of children and adolescents who are our future. Our insecurities and fears should not prolong harmful traditions that deny children their human rights and crush their aspirations.

## **Introduction**

Child marriages are not happy celebrations even when they have cultural and social legitimacy. They are about loss of childhood, neglect, abuse, exploitation and violence (Save the Children: 2014; Plan Asia and ICRW: 2013; UNICEF: 2001). In India child marriages are common and yet these are not considered as human rights violation of children. They continue as if they are private affairs of families when in fact they are criminal offenses (Ministry of Women and Child Development, GOI: 2008; Sagade: 2005; UNICEF: 2001).

There are several studies that have examined child marriage in terms of demographic trends, fertility and educational attainment and these have informed policies and programmes to some extent (Sama: 2015; Save the Children: 2014; World Bank: 2014; Young Lives: 2013; Santhya, Ram and Acharya, Jejeebhoy, Ram and Singh: 2010; UNICEF: 2012; Santhya, Jejeebhoy, and Ghosh: 2008; Santhya and Jejeebhoy: 2007; Das and Dey: 1998). They constitute a growing body of professional and technical literature based on systematic research creating national and global data, throwing light on trends, magnitude, impacts and effective responses. Yet few studies have attempted to understand it from a human rights perspective and the adolescent's perspective (UNICEF: 2001). Child marriages have also been only marginally on the agenda of the women's movement or the children's rights movement (Nirantar Trust: 2015). Impact of these marriages is more complex than can be readily captured by quantitative studies that measure the number of teenage pregnancies, pre- term births, still births, neonatal deaths, low-birth weight babies, number of years of schooling, school dropouts and secondary school enrollment etc.

The impact of child marriage on wives, husbands, families, girls and boys needs to be studied holistically so that parents and societies may begin to view this practice differently. Perpetuation of child marriages is explained in existing literature by tradition, poverty and lack of education. Yet it is also an aspect of attitudes and mindsets that are traditional and unchanging and see the girl child as a burden and youth sexuality as a problem that can be handled by repression or child marriage. Moreover there are structural inequalities heavily tilted against women and girls that influence mindsets. Therefore in referring to underlying factors we must recognize the complex interplay between poverty, iniquitous structures, patriarchal discrimination and subordination of girls and women and lack of sensitivity to human rights.

Lives of people somehow become invisible in standard researches on the issue and the findings remain meaningful to only policy makers and academics. It has been opined that small -scale qualitative researches are needed, using new methodologies wherein local people including adolescents may participate (UNICEF: 2001). These researches may better serve the purpose of advocacy with the masses as they are more likely to capture the compulsions and contradictions, the diversity in meanings of marriages for different generations and the differential experience of it by men and women. It may thus provide a compelling argument for recognizing its psycho-social impact on the individual adolescent, even while etching it in the background of the social and economic impact on individuals, families and societies.

It is with this perspective that the Child Marriage and Early Motherhood study focused on constructing profiles of adolescent boys and girls who had married before 18. We hope that this compilation of life stories of young men and women whose adolescence was challenged by child marriage will raise awareness about the situation, its context and vulnerabilities. We hope it will also help communities recognize adolescents and children as having agency, and at the same time requiring protection and care as valuable individuals of our society in a rights based perspective.

## Methodology and Research Design

This research used an exploratory, qualitative, partially structured approach through Life Histories, Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews to study the phenomena of child marriage and early motherhood<sup>1</sup>. Life stories of 42 girls/ women and 15 boys/ men form the core of our data. Forty Focused Group Discussions with a cross-section of the community, youth and various stakeholders in seven States also formed source of our data for analysis of the problem. This research involved young people at various stages of research as researchers in the field, interns and informants. A total of 10 researchers were involved in collection of primary data for this report.

### *Objectives of Research*

The objectives of the research are to:

- 1 Capture the lived experiences of young people (women and men) who married before 18 years.
- 2 Document vulnerabilities and aspirations of young people married in their childhood.
- 3 Understand consequences of early motherhood on the lives of young girls.
- 4 Understand how child marriage and early pregnancy impact health and physical wellbeing of adolescent girls.
- 5 Explore through the life history method how child marriage intersects with other social determinants such as caste, class, religion, regional location, stress or conflict situation, etc. to define particular experiences.
- 6 Document the impact of traditional customary practices such as consanguine, levirate, marriages of exchange, and marriages by kidnapping and elopement, etc. that lend legitimacy to child marriage in particular social-cultural contexts.
- 7 Document changing perceptions and practices of individuals, groups and communities in the realm of child marriage.
- 8 Understand young people as agents of change in altering the norm and practice of child marriage.
- 9 Understand young people's vision of society and development that respect their needs and concerns regarding child marriage and early pregnancy for education, skill development and gainful employment.

### *Field Site*

The study was conducted in select districts and villages of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Rajasthan and West Bengal<sup>2</sup>. The selection of states was done purposively, keeping in mind representation of some high and a few low prevalence States/Districts; States with low gender development indices; States with tribal populations and communities with specific cultural practices/forms of marriage such as marriage by kidnapping or elopement, consanguine, polygamous and levirate marriages and marriages linked to trafficking . In each of the selected States, 2-3 districts were identified on the basis of the Census 2011 Primary Census Abstract on marital status. Variations of high and low incidence districts were kept in mind while choosing districts for conducting research. Villages were chosen on the basis of literacy rate from Periodic Household Surveys. Since age at marriage is not available in village level data, literacy rate was used as a viable indicator for selection as various studies have shown a correlation between literacy rates and age at marriage. Variations of high and low literacy rates were kept in mind while selecting villages for the study. Also local knowledge of community based organizations was tapped in this selection.

Box 1: Comparative Context of Seven States in our Study

Categories	Andhra Pradesh	Assam	Bihar	Madhya Pradesh	Meghalaya	Rajasthan	West Bengal
Sex Ratio <sup>3,4</sup>	993	958	918	931	989	928	950
Child Marriage Figures <sup>5</sup>	54.7%	40%	68.2%	53.8%	Not Available	57.6%	57.9%
Maternal Mortality Rate <sup>6</sup>	6.9	21.5	22.8	21.1	Not Available	25.2	6.6
Infant Mortality Rate <sup>7</sup>	39	54	42	54	47	47	31
Rate of Crime against Women <sup>8,9</sup>	76.2	113.9	28.0	61.6	25.8	83.1	67.1
Female Literacy Rate <sup>10</sup>	59.15	66.27	51.5	59.24	72.89	52.12	70.54

There are some special contexts in each of these states. Assam has the second highest rate of crime against women. Dowry, witch hunting, rape and domestic violence are reported as the main forms of violence here. Bihar has an alarming problem of dowry and child marriages are related to high dowry demands that are linked among other things, to age of the bride (Vasudev: 2003; Nehal: 1997). Bride price called *Dappa* is prevalent in Rajasthan among certain tribal communities like Garasiya and Bhil (Parihar: 2004). There are customary practices that result in child marriage such as Aata-Saata marriages. In West Bengal child marriage is seen to be connected to prostitution and trafficking. Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Meghalaya are tribal dominant areas and have a high incidence of marriages due to elopement (Majhi: 2010). Tribals of these states have a liberal attitude towards sexuality and marriage. Meghalaya is noted for a rise in incidence of teenage pregnancies leading to child marriage (Shillong Times: 2012).

The seven States studied have interesting histories of social movements and women's movement. Telangana Peasant's Movement, Progressive Organization for Women (POW), Autonomous Women's Groups (AWG) and Anti- Arrack movement have addressed issues of violence, illiteracy, poverty, alcoholism and casteism faced by women. Andhra Pradesh has a history of strong community based agitations on women's rights. In Assam, several women's organizations like Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Mahila Sanga, All Assam Lekhika Sanstha, All Assam Lekhika Smaroooh, Mula Gabharu Sanstha, Assam Jagrata Mahila Parishad, Progressive Women's Association, and Tribal Women's Welfare Organization have taken up women's causes and insisted that women need a separate platform for self-development as they face discrimination. The Bodh Gaya Land movement, the Ganga Mukti Movement and Nirmal Gram were three women led movements in the state of Bihar. Women's issues in Bihar have been linked to issues of bonded labour, land rights, caste oppression and *Goondaism*. In Madhya Pradesh, women's leadership and participation has been marked in social movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan and activism for relief after Bhopal Gas tragedy. The Brahmo Samaj of Shillong, Ka Synjuk Ki Kynthei Riewlum or the Tribal Women's Welfare and Development Association of Meghalaya and Ka Seng Kynthei Nongrim Hills have been pioneer organizations that have taken up issues of women in Meghalaya. Khasi women are known for their active participation in politics, education and in owning land which point to their higher position in the society. In Rajasthan, movements and campaigns such as the Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan, the Kotda Adivasi Sansthan, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan and Apni Dikri Abhiyan have spoken about women's issues such as economic and social empowerment, violence against women, child marriage, livelihood, agriculture, forest rights, Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, labour migration and increasing participation of women in local governance. The Bengal Renaissance raised the gender question in context of nationalism in Bengal. It questioned child marriage, the dowry system, the caste system and religion. Post-Independence West Bengal, particularly Kolkata has seen women's engagement in revolutionary politics. Due to the political atmosphere of the State being largely Left oriented, the character of the women's movement has been focused on employment and poverty, literacy and skill acquisition and women's critique of ideologies that hold them back. The movement has not adequately addressed issues of violence against women and sexuality.

## ***Sample***

A proportionate sample was selected from the above mentioned States. Our overall sample for Life Stories includes 42 women currently in the age group of 15-29, who got married before 18 years of age and 15 men who married before 18, some of whom were husbands of the selected women informants. Most informants were married for at least two years before the study to ensure some experience of marriage that would make for a critical perspective. We did not include any particular criterion for tapping the motherhood experience<sup>11</sup>. A cross sectional selection of informants was attempted to enlist diversity in the cases being represented. The help of local organizations in each State was sought to access communities for the focus group discussions. The forty focus groups discussions conducted involved a total of 316 persons but we must be cautious about any acknowledgement of this number as our sample<sup>12</sup>. The sample for the focus group discussions did not coincide completely with the Life history sample. The informants for the life stories collected were chosen purposively from among the focus groups participants or through snowball sampling in consultation with focus groups participants and community based organizations.

In our sample of 42 women who had child marriages, 24 were married before 15 years of age and 18 were married between the ages 16-18. 5 women were married even before they turned 12 years of age. Of 15 men in our sample, 8 were married before 15 years and 7 were married when they were 16-18 years old. The girl who got married youngest was only 5 years of age and among the boys, the youngest to get married was 10 years of age.

The current average age of the women and men in our sample is approximately 21 years. The data is small but it may lend itself to an analysis along age cohorts. This is not attempted here.

Child marriage invariably means early pregnancy. The first pregnancy for 3 women was under 15 years of age, for 20 women in the age group 15-18 years, and for 11 in the age group 18-21 years. 7 women in the sample did not have any children yet and one had her first child in the age group 21-24.

The educational status of the sample is such that 13 women had studied till class 5, 14 women till class 10, 6 had less than one year of formal schooling and 9 had studied till class 12.

7 out of 15 men in this sample had studied up to class 10.

Child marriage means that most of the women tend not to be gainfully employed. 29 women in our sample of 42 were non-earning dependent, 10 earning dependent and only 3 self-supporting. As compared to women, out of a total of 15 men, 8 men were self-supporting, 4 were earning dependent and 3 were non-earning dependent. Child marriage among men also negatively affects their status in terms of being self-supporting and gainfully employed.

Looking at the data on education and employment, one may infer that both men and women who married as children have a shortfall of skills and may need skill upgradation, training and continuing education to attain self-supporting status.

Inferences drawn cannot be generalized due to our sample being small. Yet they are in line with patterns seen in larger samples. (Refer Appendix I for a basic quantitative analysis of age at marriage, current age, and gender, education and employment status).

## ***Focus Group Discussions***

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used in this research to initiate and deepen our inquiry and to locate the informants for life stories. They were also used to sharpen probes and make them more context sensitive. A total of 40 FGDs were conducted across various sites of our study. We conducted

these discussions with young students in universities and colleges, students in girl's hostels, girls in shelter homes, ASHA<sup>13</sup> workers, panchayat members, religious leaders, police, and community based organizations, women's groups (*mahila mandals*), self-help groups, *Anganwadi*<sup>14</sup> workers, school teachers, young married and unmarried men and women, older married men and women, young mothers etc. These discussions led to identifying informants for the life stories collected in this study.

Both content of these discussions and group dynamics were actively recorded and analyzed. In analyzing our data, we have looked at the group itself as a unit of analysis. These discussions gave us an opportunity to understand people in their social settings and also the possibility to understand contradictions and concurrence of opinion between subgroups within the community.

In this study, FGDs made it possible to understand the community rationale for different marriage practices, contemporary changes in marriage practices, perceptions of an intersection of community members on child marriage, schools and their potentialities to intervene, young people and their perspectives, men's perspectives etc. (Refer Appendix II for FGD details and group context)

### ***Life Histories***

Since individuals are microcosms of society, life histories have great potential to understand the phenomenon of child marriage and early pregnancy effectively through the lens of people's own perceptions and constructions (Parasuraman and Action Aid: 2003). There are social, economic, environment and cultural factors that contribute to why child marriages occur. There are also individual specificities and experiences regarding how they occur. Life histories allow for exploring both these aspects of people's lives. Life histories are the data par excellence of the social scientist, and they present a strident case for using life histories above all other methods. In analyzing the experiences and attitudes of an individual, we always reach data and elementary facts which are exclusively limited to the individual's personality, but can be treated as mere incidences of more or less general classes of data or facts, and can thus be used for the determination of laws of social becoming. Whether we draw our materials for sociological analysis from detailed life records of concrete individuals or from the observation of mass phenomena, the problems of sociological analysis are the same. But even when we are searching for abstract laws, life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material, and if social science has to use other materials at all it is only because of the practical difficulty of obtaining at the moment a sufficient number of such records to cover the totality of sociological problems, and of the enormous amount of work demanded for an adequate analysis of all the personal materials necessary to characterise the life of a social group. If we are forced to use mass phenomena as material, or any kind of happenings taken without regard to the life histories of the individuals who participated, it is a defect, not an advantage, of our present sociological method. (Zaretsky, Znaniecki, Thomas: 1996)

We collected a total of 57 life stories of women and men who married before 18 and were currently in the age group 15-29.

In understanding the central idea in an individual's story, the focal points for collection of data were childhood, schooling and education, circumstances around marriage, motherhood and its experiences, fatherhood, quality of marriage, employment, problems, aspirations and an assessment of one's own life with the centrality of marriage in it. Since the life history method is about building life stories by enabling the individuals to narrate and provide meaning to their experiences, anecdotes are important aspects of our documentation. People tell their stories through particular anecdotes that explain their rationality and perspectives. Listening to people's life stories allows the informants themselves to define what the turning points or critical events in their life were in order to understand

the factors that shaped their lives and marriages. We focused on critical events, consequentiality of those events, important persons in lives of informants, memories of special events and meanings of particular incidents.

The engagement of young researchers<sup>15</sup> in the conceptualization of the research design and collection of data contributed to the integration of young people's perspectives in this report from the top as well as from below. The researchers were all unmarried, English speaking, urban located persons who consciously attempted to build a process of 'conscientization' and relationship building based on active listening about subjective truths based on lived experiences of young informants who had married as children, lived in rural contexts and spoke vernacular languages.

Life history can be an emancipatory process as different individuals get to talk about their experience and relieve themselves of their feelings through mutual dialogue and understanding. We tried to focus on the humanistic aspects, human challenges and agency in these stories through building in our process the possibility to listen to various versions of the stories centering on child marriage and early motherhood. The meaning people make of their lives is complex and nuanced and our young researchers got an opportunity to bring in their own lens, coming from their own life story and experiences into the life history interviews. These stories therefore demonstrate both empathy and distance in understanding people's lives.

Finally, life history method can not only expand our understanding of the causes and consequences of child marriage if done non judgmentally, but it can also be helpful to see how patriarchy manifests itself in its variations and how changes occur in society through individual initiative and resistance.

There is need to converge the child marriage perspectives of the individual, the family, the immediate community and the national and global community of development planners and interventionists. All these perspectives are dynamic and together constitute the truth of the developmental challenge that child marriage poses to us at this juncture.

### ***Ethical Concerns***

This research was conducted with a consciousness to reduce any avoidable harm to the informants. Individuals below the age of 15 years were not included as part of the sample in order to avoid ethical concerns regarding interviewing younger children. Self-recruitment or voluntariness to participate in this study was emphasized. Researchers were provided an intensive session during their training to safeguard against practices which may cause harm to the participants. With the help of documentaries and prior studies dealing with interviewing people on sensitive subjects, the researchers were trained in values such as empathy, sensitivity, nonjudgmental attitude and patient listening.

Selection of persons who were interviewed was done with care towards representativeness. Young women were interviewed in their familial context carefully without jeopardizing their safety. Also since this is a sensitive area of research, researchers were careful to temporarily discontinue data collection in case probes made for re-living of painful or traumatic memories. The team was careful to address any risk of the participants feeling humiliated or their values being disregarded. Organizational links were used to approach the community so that their resources may be used in case of any perception of disquiet or discomfort in the community due to our research. Utmost importance was placed on maintaining confidentiality of the participants and taking informed oral consent of the participants prior to conducting interviews and FGDs. Researchers ensured that the purpose of the study was explained fully to all participants. All life stories in this report have pseudonyms to protect the identity of our informants. (Refer to Appendix III for further details on ethical guidelines followed in this study.)



## Discussion of Findings

### *The Right Age at Marriage*

The legal age for marriage in India, drawn from the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006<sup>16</sup>, sets the legal age for men at 21 and for women at 18. The age of sexual consent which hitherto was 16, was raised to 18 by the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013.<sup>17</sup> NFHS 2005-2006 data shows the percentage of women marrying below eighteen years to be 47.4 per cent or 1 in 2 women are child brides.<sup>18</sup> Even though sex before marriage is a taboo, a study shows pre-marital romantic relationships to be reported by 19 per cent and 9 percent of young men and women respectively and pre-marital sexual experiences by 15 per cent of men and 4 per cent of young women from a sample of 50,848 youth in the age group 15–19 and 20–24 (IIPS and Population Council: 2010). It is clear that pre-marital romance and pre-marital sex are concerns in our society and have a link to child marriage.

The understanding on the appropriate age at marriage reported from the field showed much diversity and irreverence for the legal stipulations on child marriage and age of consent.

All participants of our study were aware of the legal age at marriage, yet there seemed to be a divide between the personal choices made and the legal prescriptions.

It was expressed by several participants that age need not be the chief criteria to determine the time of marriage. Rather completion of education and finding a career were expressed to be important signifier of preparedness for marriage.

The tradition of child marriage, compulsory marriage and arranged marriage is deeply entrenched in society and was expressed by our informants to overwhelmingly direct their own lives. In our study, we found that urban boys and girls who were students were much more assertive about delaying marriage till attaining financial independence. Young people in the universities in Bodhgaya, Kolkata and Hyderabad reported that the legal age stipulated for marriage was not adequate to fulfill requirements of maturity and responsibilities of a marriage. They held that marriage should be engaged in late twenties and after completion of higher education and assurance of a job.

Although in the rural areas, most FGD participants' voiced that the appropriate age at marriage is around 20-21 years of age for girls and two or three years later for boys, there seems to be a gap between what people say and practice. Thapan (2009) writes that the cultures of adolescence in India are complex since these are mediated by marriage and motherhood and there is a child-adult continuity in terms of expectations from girl children and women, so in fact, a distinct phase of adolescence is absent. Adolescent girls in all social classes are groomed for marriage and motherhood.

In rural areas, it was next to impossible to find a sample of girls above the age of 21-22 who were unmarried. It was obvious that in fact age 21 and above is considered to be late for women to marry in rural India. In another context, men and women expressed that non marriage by that age is suspected to be due to some fault in the person or family concerned.

Participants in their life stories emphasized factors like puberty, sexual maturity, dropping out from school due to disinterest, physical and mental maturity of individuals, family contexts, economic independence especially of boys, maturity of girls in terms of readiness to handle familial responsibilities as important considerations in defining appropriate age for marriage.

Interestingly, some women participants of this research differentiated between 'good girls' and 'bad girls'. According to them, 'good girls' who adhere to parental discipline and do not engage

in relationships with boys should be allowed to study but ‘bad girls who flirt and do not listen to parents should be married off before they bring indignity to family and parents. The idea of marriage as punishment and a disciplinary exercise against ‘bad girls’ was strongly articulated in these narratives where marriage and schooling were seen in oppositional terms. Also ‘bad’ was used to refer to girls who were sexually active or engaged in pre-marital relationship/s with boys. Marriage for boys before legal age was also seen as a disciplinary requirement but not in terms of termination of education. Rather it was prescribed to make ‘irresponsible’ boys learn responsibility. Some informants emphasized that the context of a family defines appropriateness, family elders need to take decisions of marriage of their wards so that the family continues to perform its function such as need to marry sons to replace household labour requirements when mother grows old or dies and/ or men are migrating for studies or work. The case studies reveal that often women are married young or without much deliberation under the (frequently mistaken) assumption that marriage would secure happiness, safety and economic well-being of daughters.

There seems to be a tacit recognition of puberty and sexual interest among adolescents, yet there are strong patriarchal values and controls against an active adolescent sexuality outside of marriage. This appears to point at what is at stake if child marriages are to be prevented.

A less restrictive attitude to adolescent sexuality must coincide with attempts to prevent child marriage. This may require working with families and male members using gender transformative approaches, challenging dominant understanding of manhood and men’s restrictive and inequitable attitudes to girls sexuality ( Plan Asia Regional Office and ICRW: 2013).

It must be said that our research found the emergence of a changing context in which parents, young women and men are thinking more progressively about appropriate age at marriage. Young people who had married as adolescents, out of their own choice or that of their parents, talked with regret about their child marriage. It was held to have interfered in education and employment aspirations. Men and women emphasized that they will not marry their own children early and will further their children’s education. Several of those who were married without their active consent, emphasized that consent of children is important and they will not force their children to marry. This sentiment needs to be harnessed and an environment to promote such thinking needs to be created through policy and program development.



### Excerpts from life stories

*“Getting married at a young age is not good. Pregnancy at an early age is not good for a girl’s health. I think people should get married only by the age of 20-22 and by the decision of their parents because parents arrange marriages at the appropriate age. My parents were also married to each other after they were 18 years of age. I met Chelliya and we decided to run away. I was only 15 then. It’s only when girls and boys decide between themselves without parental consent that they run away at early ages.”*

- Noki Bai, 25, married at 15, Udaipur, Rajasthan

*“Before completing graduation one should not be married.”*

- Rukamani, 17 years, married at 14, Barwani, Madhya Pradesh



Box 2: FGD with Gram Panchayat Member and NGO Workers in West Bengal

### Organisation Workers and Gram Panchayat Member

Excerpts from an FGD Conducted in Canning, District 24 South Paraganas, West Bengal.  
Participant Nos 6, Aged 27- 45 Years.

#### On the Right Age to Get Married

**Participant 5:** The right time is as it is given by the constitution, 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys.

At this point other participants disagreed.

**Participant 1:** Just because the Constitution gives the ages as 18 years and 21 years, should it be our only target? Just because it is said as the minimum age should we get married by that age?<sup>19</sup>

**Participant 2:** By that age even one's education is not over.

**Participant 3:** What does a boy achieve at the age of 21? Nothing.

**Participant 5:** By that age boys can graduate only.

**Participant 1:** If everything goes well then perhaps the boy can graduate at the age of 21 or 22 years. However how will he support a family? He needs to find a job and would be settled in another 3 years perhaps. So by the time a boy is 26-27 a boy is ready for marriage. He would be established by then. Marriage does not mean getting a man and a woman together anyhow.”

**Participant 3:** By then a women also would be a graduate.

**Participant 5:** Having a job and being settled means being established and successful but marriage is not about being established, it just means making a couple.

**Participant 1:** Because our constitution has given the age as 18 years and 21 years our mind has got stuck to the figure and does not move beyond it.

To which everyone in the group agreed.

**Participant 1:** An individual should get married at the age when he realizes that he can bear the responsibility of a wife and give her dignity. Only an individual can decide the right age for himself/ herself.

### *Customary Marriages: Practices and Aberrations*

India is a mosaic of different cultures and religions and child marriage is defined in the traditional kinship and religious networks as an integral component of community's identity and social life and there are some shifts but many enduring patterns which define the position of women.(Kaur and Palriwala: 2014). Communities are possessive of kinship practices which are outdated, harmful and reflective of patriarchal thinking. These kinship systems are complicit in sustaining continuing of subordination of women (Ghosh: 2011). The relationship between the wife-givers and the wife-receivers<sup>20</sup> continues to be an unequal one.

In this study we looked at those customary and cultural forms of marriage practices that encourage and legitimize child marriage. Child marriages are arranged through these practices by families as well as the community. Often myth and folklore romanticize these marriages and young girls and boys are susceptible to family pressure and community encouragement even when these marriages are sometimes not legally recognized unions.

There still exist in most communities, traditional match-makers who initiate marriage proposals and organize marriages in consonance with caste, religion and honour codes of conduct (Engels: 1996; Rao: 1982). They ensure that girls and boys find spouses once they attain puberty and families are able to settle their responsibilities within prescribed norms of behavior ensuring family honour is not tainted by any transgressions. Clan and village exogamy is usually practiced in the rural context in northern India and elsewhere and child marriage is also linked to these considerations which limit choice of spouse and compel parents to marry daughters whenever good proposals come their way. Marriages that breach the principles of village and clan exogamy are bitterly contested (Chowdhry: 1998).

FGDs and life story interviews conducted in Rajasthan show that many child marriages happen through the customary practice of *aata-saata*. *Aata-saata* marriages literally mean Marriages of Exchange. In such a marriage, a pair of siblings- a brother and a sister- are married off to another pair of siblings, so a daughter is given to a family from where a daughter-in-law is obtained. The community explains it as a practice that addresses the problem of a skewed sex ratio by ensuring that both the families involved in conjugal relations get a girl. It is also explained as ensuring stability of marital unions, reducing the burden of dowry, protecting girls from ill-treatment and violence at their marital homes. However during the field study we found information that there are instances of reciprocal violence and breakdown of one set of marital relations due to the interconnectedness with the other.<sup>21</sup> Within such customary practices it is essential to note that although both young women as well as men maybe compelled to marry against their will, there is greater instrumentalization and subordination of women.

The age of the children being bartered in this arrangement is inconsequential and very small children also get bound in marriage even when their transfer to the marital home (*gauna*) may be delayed till puberty. The community does not recognize the violation of rights of the child and adolescents as it continues to practice it as a functional custom and tradition.



### Excerpts from life stories

*“When I was 12 years old my older brother was to get married. I got married under the system of aata saata. My husband’s parents were insecure that their son would not find a girl to marry when he was older. Since they were giving a daughter to my house they insisted I be married to their son”*

- Lekhi, 21, married at 12, Udaipur, Rajasthan



Levirate was also found to be an acceptable form of marriage in Northern India. In our study we were informed of an exceptional case of levirate marriage where a man currently aged 24 was compelled to marry three of his elder sisters-in-law despite being married himself, when in a series of accidents, his three brothers died. His first marriage was at the age of 14 and subsequently the

other marriages were performed in a span of seven-eight years. This was a family solution to retain children born of the other brothers within the household. This informant complained of the fact that nobody really bothered about his view on it and that he is stressed due to the economic burden of supporting such a large family that is not of his own making.<sup>22</sup> An instance of sororate marriage, where the younger sister is married to the husband of the dead elder sister also came to our notice. (Refer life story of Jyotsna from Telengana).



### Excerpts from life stories

*“I was the youngest of four brothers. All four of us were married to four sisters in a group wedding. I was 14 years old at that time of marriage. By the time I was 21-22 three of my older brothers died. All of us had 14 children between the four of us by that time. If my three widowed sisters-in-law left after my brothers’ death who would look after their children? So under family pressure I was married to all three sisters-in-law.”*

– Pranav, 24, married at 14, Udaipur, Rajasthan

*“I was married to my deceased sister’s husband because my mother- in- law had proposed the marriage to my father. It was done just after my sister’s final rites were performed...I feel responsible for my husband’s happiness. Quite naturally, it is my responsibility to make him feel better each day as he has gone through quite a tragic phase. As for me, I am happy that my in- laws and husband give me enough space around the house and treat my children with great care and fondness. I hope to make them happier by producing a male child someday.”*

–Jyotsna, 26, married at 14, Mahabubnagar, Telangana



Right to marital choice, a fundamental human right under Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights becomes meaningless and considerations of age, consent and law are all kept aside in the customary settlement of such marriages where one individual substitutes another as per family decisions.

Yet another form of child marriage is consanguineous marriage that is commonly practiced among the Muslims and certain South Indian Hindu communities (Mukherjee, Das and Banik: 2007). In this study, examples of consanguineous marriages were found across Rajasthan, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. These marriages also have an understanding of reciprocity amongst kin in groom and bride exchange and in one variant in South India, girls are married to the mother’s brother. These marriages may involve considerable age difference but are considered to make for a better status for girls as the families are known to each other and ensure a smooth transfer and adaptation. (Refer life story of Karima and Devi from Andhra Pradesh).



### Excerpts from life stories

*“My parents thought that I will be secure with my uncle and my grandmother was also sick. Somebody was needed to take care of her so they married me to him.”*

– Devi, 21, married at 10, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh



Marriages performed in groups involving several adolescents either at special occasions or to economize the cost incurred at the wedding are fairly common all over the country. This is usually done by the community, a philanthropic trust or by means of a temple initiative. The families/community marry all their children who have gained puberty, in one ceremony, which makes for an economy of scale but which is especially disadvantageous to the younger girls and boys who are bunched together with other older girls and boys all married in one social function. In Bihar, a practice called *Dham* marriage is common where people from lower socio – economic background bring their children at a pre-decided time for a temple wedding. *Dham* marriages often involve marriages of adolescents. (Refer to Life story of Amit from Bihar). In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, group marriages are traditionally organized during *Akha Teej* or *Akshay Tithiya*. However due to high scrutiny during these festivals in contemporary times, child marriages don't take place in large groups anymore but are practiced secretly during the night. In West Bengal, another interesting variant is of adolescents running in concert to Kolkata to get married together in temples like the *Kali-bari*. These marriages are self-initiated and against parental decision and the temple or gods are seen as legitimizing sacred authority over and above parents. In this context, it is observed that there is a kind of peer pressure that motivates the young couples to get into child marriage. These marriages of resistance show adolescent agency and fear, but also their lack of power in the scheme of things.



### Excerpts from life stories

*“I got married in a Dham marriage. Dham is a temple in Bihar where people marry their children. In Dham marriage other rituals of marriage will be same but at the same time many couples get married. Dham marriage promotes child marriage but the pandit protects and guarantees these marriages of underage girls”*

- Amit, 23, married at 16, Gaya, Bihar.

*“My friends and I eloped with our girlfriends to a Kali Mandir in Kolkata. But we could not get married as the priest refused to marry us for being under-aged. So we decided to get married after a few years. However when we got back home my girlfriend's mother refused to take her back so I had to get her to my house and we were married ceremonially.”*

– Sobiram, 20, married at 15, Murshidabad, West Bengal



*Gauna* is a common practice in north India where girls get married at very young age but their parents do not send them to their marital homes till later. Parents keep them in their natal homes till they attain puberty which signifies maturity (Speizer and Pearson: 2011). During this research, *gauna* practices were reported by communities in Rajasthan and Bihar. While *gauna* is believed to reduce the impact of child marriage on adolescent girls in terms of onset of early sexuality and early pregnancy as the girls are not sent to the marital home till they are mature enough, it is not always the case as very often the *gauna* takes place before the girl turns 18 years old. Also informants point out that the transfer is dependent not so much on girls' age or maturity, rather on the marital home's requirement for female labour. (Refer to FGD excerpt in Box No. 3).



### Excerpts from life stories

*“Ever since I remember, I have been married. No one spoke to me about what marriage is like, what the expectations are, what difficulties etc. one faces after marriage. When my aunt would visit us from her in-law's house I would overhear talk of my gauna and how I would soon join my husband in the same house. I never asked about who I was married to and why either. My father died and my mother was married to another man. I was their only child brought up in my paternal grandparents' home. I had no choice but to accept their decision when the time for my gauna came.”*

– Subhadra, 20, married at 5, Udaipur, Rajasthan



Among tribal communities in various part of India, marriage by abduction or mutual consent and elopement is fairly common and acceptable. After the elopement the two families come together and negotiate through the exchange of visits and gifts and a formal ceremony may take place thereafter or the boy and girl simply start living as a couple. Sometimes these elopements are also ceremonially arranged (Vidayarthi and Rai: 1976). Evidences of such marriages have been found among the tribes of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. At an annual *mela* which is held in Garasiya and Bhil tribal villages in the Udaipur district of Rajasthan it is very common for young boys and girls to elope with self-chosen partners. Among the Bhils and Bhilalas of Madhya Pradesh ‘*Bhagoria*’ festival is celebrated where young boys and girls elope ceremonially and are later accepted as man and wife by the community. With these forms enjoying cultural sanction, adolescent girls and boys often engage in child marriage without thinking through the consequences. Even when parents may not agree to the choice of their adolescent children, they are forced to accept them for fear of a police case being lodged by the girl's family.

## Excerpts from life stories

*“I met Kishor when I was in Class 8. I liked him because he had a good physique, he gave me nice gifts and we fell in love. Our desire for each other was very strong. He proposed marriage and asked me to run away with him. I said no. Then he made a plan. He came with his friends and kidnapped me. Later we were married even though my parents did not accept it easily. I loved him but I did not want to get married just then.”*

- Rukamani, 17, married at 14, Barwani, Madhya Pradesh

*“I met Sapan at a hospital when we both were tending to our families. We liked each other but then after the hospital stay ended we lost touch. When one day he found me, we spent a day out with each other. He proposed marriage but my mother refused. The week after that Sapan invited me to his house to see the place but it got too late to go back home so he proposed that he will put vermilion on my forehead and thus I could stay there...He said we were now a married couple. The next day when I went back home my parents said that since I had stayed back I should now get married to Sapan in a ceremony, otherwise my family reputation would be at stake.”*

- Anu, 25, married at 14, Hooghly, West Bengal

## Against Custom, Against Tradition: the Story of Sapna and the Pain of Compulsory Marriages

*“I did not marry out of choice. I was forced and pressured by my family. From childhood I was like a boy but for my family it was beyond their understanding that someone could be born a girl and think of themselves as a man. When there was pressure from home I got married. My husband forced me to have intercourse. He even went to my family and complained when I refused. They also believed that I could change through sexual intercourse with a man. It was like rape for me. Then I met my current partner in my workplace. She is a trans-woman. She heard my story and became my friend. She helped me to get a divorce. The whole situation made me so crazy that I had to go for counseling. Only my elder sister supported me through this situation. She was the only one who understood me but she could not help because of the social pressure. But when she saw that I was not happy in the marriage she took a firm stand and helped me. It took me two years to get out of the marriage. But in the process half my life was lost. Today I am trying to rebuild my life again.”*

- Sapna, 29, married by force, West Bengal.

This research captured the life story of a person who identifies as a female to male transgender who was forced to enter into a marriage and faced rape within it as a means to correct “him”<sup>23</sup>. The spouse was a friend who proposed marriage and when Sapna disagreed, the friend tried to taint Sapna’s name by spreading rumours about their sexual involvement. The family forced Sapna to get married as their honour was at stake. Sapna took two years to move out of a violent marriage and finally get a divorce. With the help of a transgender woman Sapna came to terms with “his” identity and today works in an NGO for other trans-people.

Due to the centrality of marriage and compulsory heterosexuality in the patriarchal society there is no tolerance of men and women who transgress their assigned gender and opt for either living alternative sexualities or living out of marriage. Any deviation is a threat to the society. Alternative sexual desires are forcefully repressed. We fail to recognize how the compulsion of marriage is forced upon young people and ‘nonfunctional’ arrangements of marriage are thrust on to persons having different aspirations for life. Ordinarily such cases of forced marriage may not merit study as a child marriage because the complexities of real life are smoothed out such that child marriage is treated distinctly from issues such as alternative sexualities or trafficking. Our research with its focus on life stories gave us a possibility to go beyond simple versions of the phenomenon.



Child marriages in context of Marriages of Purchase are also found in several parts of the country. These have to be distinguished from marriages which involve payment of bride price. In Rajasthan we were told that older men who do not find a wife in their community, purchase adolescent wives from other communities and from States like Bihar and West Bengal. (Refer to FGD in Box No. 3).

Our research also revealed that child marriage is modus operandi for the trafficking of minor girls in West Bengal. Child marriage is a conduit for prostitution, trafficking and bonded labour where adolescent girls find themselves cheated and misled<sup>24</sup> (Ghosh: 2009; Ghosh and Mohan Kar: 2008). This is sometimes with parental complicity and at times due to ignorance of families of young girls. Due to the stigma attached to single women and burden of dowry on poor families, often families cannot refuse marriage proposal from men who offer to pay for adolescent virgin girl brides only to bring them to the market for sale. Often the traffickers can also silence parents and shame them by their complicity from reverse accusation of prostitution and trafficking (Ghosh: 2009). During this research, FGDs with organization workers and young girls residing in the shelter homes showed evidence that there are several girls who had been trafficked through child marriage and subsequently rescued.

Dowry is commonly practiced among all castes and religions though traditionally it has been linked to the upper caste and upper class Hindus. Dowry is governed by strong patriarchal structures and norms. The custom of hypergamy is linked neither to community nor on wealth transfer involved in dowry. Dowry rates are determined by several factors such as education level of the groom, the age of the bride and the groom, the looks of bride and groom as well as the caste and class background (Dalmia and Lawrence: 2005). It was held by informants particularly in Bihar that the dowry demands are higher for older girls so parents engage in child marriage to avoid the stress of paying high, unfeasible dowries. While it is commonly held that dowry is a girl's inheritance from her natal family and comes of use in her own settlement, it is rarely the case that adolescent girls exercise power or control over dowry settlements. The demand for dowry in fact creates a burden on the family of the girls who are therefore inclined to marry the daughters during their childhood to reduce the dowry burden. Girl children are discriminated against due to negative feelings attached to this forced alienation of wealth based on customary rules.

## EXCERPTS FROM LIFE STORIES

*"I was not very happy but my mother was worried about me and she never had anything to pay for my dowry so she married me."*

- Ratna, 24, married at 10, Gaya, Bihar

Bride price, a payment paid by groom to brides has also been commonly reported among some of the tribes of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh where informants have submitted that the high bride price compels young boys to elope with girls so that subsequently the elders can come to a compromise that is less daunting. Rising dowry and bride price amounts appear to be customary practices that make boys and girls vulnerable to child marriage by eloping as well as by arrangement. Interestingly it is reported that even in communities where bride price was traditionally not practiced; older men have started paying bride price for marrying young adolescent girls, compelling young people to anticipate and make choices themselves through elopement. Girls may prefer against their families a partner of their own age than marry a man several years older, chosen for the bride price he pays the family.

It is apparent that customary practices like the ones mentioned above mean that even while child marriage is prohibited in India by existing law, it is widely condoned in practice. Moreover most marriages in India remain unregistered and law is not applied to such customary violations of the legal age at marriage since marriages contracted under these conditions have religious and traditional validity. Our colonial past may also explain our context in which we continue to value customary law and parental consent over legislation. Moreover law enforcement agencies say there are few prosecutions against law breakers in case of child marriage, as they involve parents, families and spouses and may endanger women's and girls' interests or increase her vulnerabilities. This is further complicated as due to irregular birth registrations, adolescent girls and boys married before the legal age are regularly passed off as being older than their age by families and religious authorities engaged in officiating marriage ceremonies under customary rites.

Box 3: FGD with Grassroot Workers in Rajasthan

### Grassroot Workers and Panchayat Members

Excerpts from FGD in Village Bedla, District Udaipur, Rajasthan.  
Participants Nos 8, Aged 21-60 Years

#### On Customary Practices

- Participant 2** It is very common in Rajasthan to see that 2-3 girls and boys get married together. This happens to save money. Expenditure for everyone's marriage happens once. The girls in such cases do not live in their in-laws house right away. *Gauna* happens at a later age. In Gujjars it has been seen that it is difficult to get boys married at a later age as the community perceives that there must be something wrong with the boy which is why he did not get married before 18 years of age.
- Participant 1** Yes in my caste too that is the case.
- Participant 5** If an older sister is getting married younger ones are married off in the same ceremony to save costs.
- Participant 5** Even in Muslims in our area we've seen child marriages are prevalent. *Gauna* happens according to the wishes of the in-laws. Whenever they feel they require the girl to work at home the *gauna* happens.
- Participant 1** Mostly *gauna* happens after the age of 18. But uneducated people do *gauna* earlier than that also.
- Participant 5** It's not so much about the age but more about the requirement in the in-laws home.
- Participant 3** In my community (Garasiya- ST) there is no system of marriage. People run away together and begin living together. They elope by choice. Even in the Bhil community this is a common practice. There is a fair that is organized every year where most young couples elope. Sometimes they plan the elopement in advance. Sometimes young people meet at the fair and run away spontaneously.
- Participant 8** People living in remote areas in difficult economic situations think that getting their children married in childhood to financially secure homes in far off villages will ensure a better future for them. At least they will get something to eat and have more exposure.

**Participant 2** Baniyas have money and education. It is difficult for Baniya staying in villages to get married due to the number of girls being very less. There are Baniya men in my village who are 30-35 years of age but are still unmarried. In such cases they usually marry girls from other castes after paying a huge bride price.

**Participant 5** Even the cost of the wedding is done by the boy's side. 40-45 year old men have been seen to be getting married to very young girls. But in such cases girls get an option to refuse as they are spoilt for choice due to more number of boys than girls.

**Participant 5** In my village there are a few men who are now 40-50 years of age and never got married at all. Recently a couple of them got married to these young girls around 17-18 years of age. One girl is from Bihar and the other is from West Bengal. They're both from very poor families and were paid by the boy's parents to marry their sons.

**Participant 8** In my village too I have seen older men buying brides from far off states. Everyone in their village knows that these girls have been bought. I haven't heard of instances of violence from such families but these girls, who have been bought, rarely go out of the house. They don't know anyone and keep to themselves. It's hard to talk to them because of differences in language.

**Participant 2** The money paid in exchange for such girls is to maintain the family. Then there are brokers who organize such marriages. They charge a lot and take a big chunk of the money paid to the girl's family.

#### **On Girls Choosing their Own Partners**

**Participant 1** Parents will not accept if girl's start choosing their own life partners.

**Participant 5** It's not like all boys and girls who run away and get married are necessarily happy though. I've seen cases of elopement where women have suffered as much as women who were married as per their parent's wishes.

**Participant 7** If a girl who elopes against her parent's wishes has problems in her marriage, her parents will not support her. If she marries as per her parent's wishes at least she will have their support.

**Participant 8** What if a girl is financially independent? In that case she doesn't need any support from her parents. There is a couple in my family. They are both young and earning. They are unmarried but living together and they are quite happy. Both families have also compromised and accepted.

*There is silence from other participants for a while in response to the above statement.*

**Participant 5** Parents will kill such girls in my community.

**Participant 7** I think girls should choose their own partners. Who knows in any marriage whether girls will be happy or not. If you get married at an age where you are mentally mature and you marry someone of your own choice then at least her partner and she can sort out their own issues on the basis of a common understanding.

**Participant 1** Girls are not allowed to talk to boys at all in my village. How can I choose my own partner if I'm not allowed to talk to any boy?

- Participant 8** Once married it is next to impossible for girls to get out of these marriages. Younger girls especially because by the time they grow up and start thinking about themselves, the in-laws have managed to dominate and control them entirely.
- Participant 4** In my community (Garasiya-ST) women who don't want to stay married can leave their husbands and marry someone else.
- Participant 5** A girl after she gets married gains more respect and standing in the marital home. Regardless of age, a girl is considered a woman once she is married.
- Participant 6** Getting girls married in their childhood is also a way for the brothers to control their sisters.
- Participant 5** In my community it is impossible for unhappily married girls to refuse. Even if your husband beats you or abuses you, society will pin the fault on the girl saying there must be something wrong with her. The younger you are when you get married the more vulnerable you are to facing violence.
- Participant 3** I don't want to get married at all. I would be happy staying alone and earning for myself.

### ***Causes of Child Marriage***

In this research we attempted to document informants perspectives on causes of child marriage through their own stories.

One of the most important causes mentioned by both young people and elder community representatives was the **parental fear of transgression of sexuality norms**. The fear of family honour being tainted through any sexual indiscretions by girls and boys made families apprehensive and they arranged child marriages to ensure that community norms of sexual conduct are observed without any fault.

In West Bengal there is evidence of sudden marriages also referred to as '*hothat kori biya*'. These refer to impromptu marriages which may involve adolescents who fall in love and try to elope. Some of these marriages are arranged by parents. These may take place in the temple or at the bride's place but are organized at short notice. It seems, when arranged, these marriages may involve family concerns about transgressions of sexuality or fears about police authorities and may also be done to avoid entertaining several relatives (Tenhunen: 2008). Virginity of girls is of high value in Indian society and caste restrictions on marriage are strictly observed (Dhawan: 2011). Premarital pregnancy, and elopement are very common among adolescents and this is managed in anticipation by reining the adolescents with marital responsibilities. Control of girls' sexuality has material implications as dowry and gifts exchanged at the time of marriage are regulated along caste lines and there is complicity of families and communities in maintaining this structure which is threatened by young people who wish to marry or have sexual relations with those outside of the normative structures of the caste system (Chakravarti: 2006).

## Excerpts from life stories

*“Our locality is not very good. One of my cousins had run away. So my father was very scared that it might happen with me as well and got me married when I was a child. I have never done anything bad like that. But I was married off. My uncles also told my father that it was a waste of money to educate me as there was already scarcity of money.”*

- Poonam, 18, married at 14, Murshidabad, West Bengal

*My marriage happened in my childhood which was of course due to circumstances... mainly pregnancy”*

- Lily, 26, married at 17, East Khasi Hills Meghalaya

*“My brother came to know about my relationship and refused to accept because my lover belonged to a lower caste. He discontinued my education and took away my mobile phone. When I couldn't bear it anymore I ran away from my house and asked him to come and take me otherwise I would commit suicide. This is when I started living with my husband.”*

- Nandini, 19, married at 17, Kamrup, Assam

*“I had to hide and meet my wife at night so I felt guilty about it. Her marriage was getting fixed so we decided to elope.”*

- Baba, 21, married at 17, Murshidabad, West Bengal

*“My sister had eloped with her boyfriend. After this incident my father became protective and fixed my marriage”*

- Priyanka, 19, married at 16, Barwani, Madhya Pradesh

Box 4: FGD with Mothers-in-Law and Married Women of the Lambadi Community in Andhra Pradesh

### Mothers-in-law and Married Women of the Lambadi Community

Excerpts from an FGD Conducted in Village Narsaipalli, District Gudur, Andhra Pradesh.

Participant Nos 7, Aged 29 – 36.

#### On Dowry

**Participant 7** Yes, we do take dowry just as we give dowry. I had asked for dowry from my daughter in law. I don't think that taking dowry is wrong in any way as what we receive as dowry will be used for her (daughter in law) in future.

**Participant 6** In today's generation, where daughters-in-law get high dowry they refuse to do household work. My daughter-in-law has brought 10 lakh rupees and some amount of gold as her dowry. So she never does the household work.

**Participant 5** Even my daughter-in-law refused to do household work. She said she has a job and earns money so she shouldn't work after returning home from work. She suggested we hire domestic help if household work was becoming a big task.

**Participant 4** We also have paid dowry but we respected our mothers-in-law but nowadays these young generation daughters-in-law never listen to us.

#### On Ending the Dowry System

**Participant 1** No, I don't want to end this system as I have paid dowry. We have paid dowry for our daughter so I want to continue with that.

**Participant 5** Dowry is paid for the betterment of their daughter and not for their son in law so why not take and give dowry?

**Participant 2** I don't like this practice as the practice of dowry is a recent phenomenon in our community. It is very problematic when parents are not able to pay the dowry. It is the bride and her family that suffers. I am against it but we have to live here in this society so we have to follow everything that society will ask to follow.

### On Impacts of Child Marriage

**Participant 2** Whenever I have met children who are born to very young mothers, I have observed that these children grow slower than others. So child marriage affects not just mothers but children also. The mothers get weaker and become malnourished. Domestic violence is also very common in child marriages.

**Participant 5** The children are also weak, they need more attention than other children. Their learning is also very slow. There are children who perform better but most of them are less developed.

**Participant 3** Children are like flowers, they require much care and affection to grow and develop. But most of them who come to my center are always in a disturbed state of mind. Their families go through lot of troubles. Their mothers are victims of domestic violence and sometimes they do not have anything to support them.

Another very important reason mentioned primarily by girls was **poverty and economic instability of their natal family**. Poverty erodes the capacity of families to cope with the stress of sheltering growing girls especially if the girl is not studying or contributing to the family income. Girls may then come to be seen as burdensome and illiteracy and large family size often compounds the problem of economic instability. Low household income may also force boys to drop out from school and contribute to family income. Once they are out of school and earning they are also seen as 'marriageable' and this is one reason for child marriage among boys.

In our study we found intergenerational poverty and child marriage to be linked and in the face of inadequate support systems, child marriage of girls was seen as a pragmatic choice ensuring her protection as well as relief in terms of family obligations (Ghosh: 2011). Presence of several girl children in the family and mother's fears regarding ability to find suitable matches for daughters spurred child marriage decisions in a few life stories. Migration for agricultural work and child marriage was reported to be linked among tribal communities in Andhra Pradesh who take their sons with them as field hands when they migrate and marry their daughters in the last place of stay.

### Excerpts from life stories

*"We (natal family) are not well to do, and my husband is earning, so my family felt if they marry me I will be secure monetarily."*

- Binata, 23, married at 17, Kamrup, Assam

*"My parents were very poor. They could not even feed me. So they arranged my marriage with Linga who is from an economically better off family. They have 5 acres of land on which they cultivate Jowar."*

- Ramia, 16, married at 14, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

Box 5: FGD with Women Married Before 18 Years of Age of Bihar

**Women Married Before 18 Years of Age**

Excerpts from an FGD Conducted in Village Jhikatiya, District Gaya, Bihar.

Participant Nos 7, Aged 17-30.

**On Dowry**

- Participant 3** Dowry is a rampant practice. Some people take less, some take more, but they all ask for it. No one is marrying without dowry.
- Participant 5** They sell off their land or other things just to settle that amount of dowry so that they can marry their daughters.
- Participant 5** We never get anything from dowry amount, we cannot ask our in-laws for that money that they have got from our parents
- Participant 4** If people do not ask for dowry then I guess there will be less child marriage. These girls will not be looked as burden in the house.
- Participant 5** Nobody dares to say no to dowry and if we say no then we will have to stay at our maternal home forever.

It is also reported that **death or desertion by father** and extremes of poverty leads mothers to marry off daughters as children even when they themselves may have faced the problem of child marriage and identified it as the reason for their sorrow. Bride price and dowry payments and families ability or inability to pay them prompted decisions to marry girls to men who were older, or to men belonging to other castes or compelled young boys and girls to elope to avoid paying exorbitant dowry or bride price. In some cases, girl's natal families are both economically precarious and oppressive, and so they are married off as children on the initiative of their mothers to relieve them of the economic and emotional hardships, as well as to reduce the financial pressures on the natal household. Families that are not marked by physical violence or alcohol use, could still hasten marriages of daughters because of their economic fragility that could be exacerbated by certain events; in some instances crop failure and landlessness force rural farmers to migrate to urban areas; at other times, life events such as a mother's sickness and subsequent death may trigger the child marriage of an older daughter either because the household has no female head or because of the step-mother's interventions.

It is also important to locate child marriage in the normative context of urban slums that dictate that girls, especially from economically vulnerable homes are married on attaining puberty. The lack of educational and 'respectable' employment opportunities for women and the desire to create micro-villages by rural migrants, governed by cultural expectations similar to their villages, appear to be some of the contributing factors that pressurize slum dwelling families into child marriages of their daughters. In slums, a girl who is single and several years past her puberty may prompt speculations that there is 'something wrong with her', thus compromising her in the marriage market. Families often believe that marriage safeguards their young daughters from sexual predators as well as confers economic and social stability and increases their standing among their *jaat walas* (caste groups). This belief is not without rationale, since marginal urban environments, such as slums, offer little protection from victimization, particularly sexual violations and limited opportunities for translating education into livelihoods, particularly for women. A diffused sense of physical insecurity permeates these spaces, where an alcoholic father's friends may try to make advances towards a young daughter or young men may harass her realizing that the father is incapable of protecting his daughters. Sometimes young women elope to get respite from an abusive family, seeking refuge in a boyfriend with seriously adverse consequences awaiting them. Thus, the clustering of economic and social disadvantages and physical insecurity ultimately shapes girl's life trajectories.

**Natural calamities such as floods, riots and conflict situations have been mentioned as crisis situations worsening the plight of poverty** (World Vision: 2013) and forcing parents to marry their daughters. Loss of economic resources such as land, property and inheritance are often quoted as reasons for negotiating child marriage of daughters and sons. Dowry or bride price brings relief to families under distress. (Refer to life story of Samia from Andhra Pradesh and life stories of Geeta, Surili and Sushma from Bihar).

The age at marriage and circumstances under which women are married is one of the most critical factors that determines future life outcomes. When a household is subjected to a single or multiple shocks, families are compelled by circumstances to marry off their daughters not necessarily to the most suitable man, but to the most convenient suitor who happens to be present at that moment.



### Excerpts from life stories

*“I am from a Muslim family and we were living in a Hindu area. My parents were fearful for me. So they married me early.”*

– Samia, 19, married at 14, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

*“In flood we lost everything...our land was gone and my father had nothing to pay as dowry, so they married me”*

– Sushma, 22, married at 17, Munger, Bihar



**Unpleasant conditions of natal home, restrictions on mobility, autonomy and conflict within the family were mentioned as a cause by both men and women for favouring child marriage.** Several girls mentioned that they liked the autonomy after marriage where they could make decisions about their families and their lives. Parental surveillance on adolescent girls and boys was mentioned as a strong factor compelling young people to not only elope and choose their own partners but to also be excited about arranged marriages which opened a new phase of life for them.



### Excerpts from life stories

*“After marriage I have become the queen of my home. I was never valued before marriage in my natal home. My father did not allow me to even play outside home”*

- Samia 19, married at 14, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh



In an FGD in Bihar, **violence in natal home**, and sexual and physical violence by close relations were reported to be reasons for adolescent girls eloping and marrying before the age of 18.

Young people reported **uncontrollable sexual attraction** that compelled them to suspend all rationality and even when they knew that they did not really want to marry, they took decisions to elope and get married because otherwise the fear and negative evaluation of adults seemed



insurmountable. In this context, emotional pressure by partners due to perceived threat of the other partner moving away or being married off to somebody else was reported. Both boys and girls reported these pressures of falling in love and wish for sexual intimacy and the fear of shame if their relationship was discovered by parents. Conversely marriage being seen culturally as coming of age conferred some space even for those who married as children. This personal and individual space which the family otherwise transgresses routinely in case of adolescents who remain unmarried was reported as a site for conflict. Loneliness and the need for love were specially articulated by young people in Meghalaya to be the reason for child marriage. Absence of dowry or bride price and higher literacy figures in Meghalaya are offset by a rise in premarital sex, teenage pregnancies and child marriage as out of wedlock pregnancies are still not accepted in the society.



### Excerpts from life stories

*“I was so much in love with my wife before marriage and one day when I asked her to marry me, she agreed, then we eloped... I was too young to think about the consequences after marriage.”*

- Mohammad Ali, 19, married at 17, Barpeta, Assam

*“Most of my childhood I have spent in isolation as both my parents died in an accident when I was studying in class-5. After some months of being together we decided to get married as I needed a family of my own. He expressed how much he loved and wanted to marry me.”*

- Rose, 19, married at 16, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

*My girlfriend’s parents had fixed her marriage elsewhere so I had to get married to her.*

- Kishor, 18, married at 15, Barwani, Madhya Pradesh

*“I agree that education is important in our life and to survive in this competitive world one needs to be aware and open minded. But to me family comes first because family gives me a special bonding and love. One day we will all grow old and need someone to take care of us. This is what we can get from our family, not from education.”*

- Sonia, 19, married at 16, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

*When he told me that his family had begun searching for a bride for him, I felt very helpless. I did not want to lose my love. I then decided that after completing my 10th exam, we would elope. I could not think of anything at the time. He kept asking me to think it over but I was adamant on marrying him only. I knew that once I completed standard 12, my parents too would begin searching for an alliance but by that time, he would have been married. At that time, love was greater than ambition.”*

- Avanthika, 18, married at 17, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh



Box 6: FGD with Male and Female Secondary School Teachers in Meghalaya

### Male and Female School Teachers, Secondary School

Excerpts from FGD in Mawiong, District East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

Participant Nos 7, Aged 23-36 Years.

#### On Marriage Practices

- Participant 5** Most marriages happen due to love relationships. Usually there is mutual understanding between the parents and children. If parents do not agree they forbid and urge their son or daughter to end the relationship. But this happens in extreme conditions.
- Participant 3** None of us here (participants) faced forced or arranged marriage. Everyone had a love marriage. And it is more satisfactory on the part of the person to get married that way because if the partners know each other well, it is always better rather than being forced to marry a random partner. And it is also wrong and irresponsible on the part of the parents to urge their children to marry forcefully.
- Participant 4** That is the condition here. We will also continue the same practice of giving the choice to our children to decide on their partner. It is no joke, and the person to get married should have the right to choose.
- Participant 6** However, sometimes there are certain cases when two people start living together (live-in relationship), they might hurry marriage when pregnancy happens or when two immature partners decide to get married when they are not even ready. In that case it bodes problem for their married life because they are not ready to settle and start a family. Rather they are compelled by pregnancy. Perhaps they were too young to foresee.

**Household need for women's unpaid labour has also been found to be a cause.** In an FGD conducted in Madhya Pradesh, boys said that the marriage was arranged by parents specially so that the wife could take care of the old parents, household and agricultural work, when men migrate to cities for education. This was also expressed in FGDs and life histories conducted in Bihar. Marriage is solemnized by parents to substitute the loss of migrating members and to ensure that men maintain ties with their homes and keep returning periodically. Gender norms and roles are clearly defined in our society. Public sphere is still upheld as the male domain and the private sphere is considered to be the women's responsibility. Our study shows that the daughters and daughters-in-law are expected to do household chores along with their schooling and paid labour outside the home. Parents do not find any point in investing in their education as ultimately girls are expected to perform the very same duties and household activities in their marital homes. Thus it is held to be more important for them to be groomed in household chores and learn feminine humility than go to school. Also higher education among girls is seen negatively in certain sections for fear of it spoiling women's prospects of marriage or increasing dowry demands in the marriage market. Having unmarried daughters at home is a stressful factor for those whose daughters choose to delay marriages on grounds of education or work related aspirations.

Box 7: FGD with Young Men in Madhya Pradesh

### Young Men Some of Whom were Married Under 18

Excerpts from an FGD in Village Sawariyapani, Block Pati, District Barwani, Madhya Pradesh.

Participant Nos 8, Aged 17 – 23 Years.

#### On Causes of Child Marriage and its Consequences

**Participant 7** We all are farm laborers, we require people in our family who can help us to work in the field and house.

**Participant 5** We are also scared that powerful persons from the villages e.g. Sarpanch and Patel may forcefully marry our girls and we cannot fight with them. There is a small village near Kalakhet. Patel from that village married thrice in 15 years. Two of them are forced marriage. This is also the reason that we marry our girls at an early age.

**Participant 8** Another aspect of the problem is that, there are people who send their children to school but they elope. What we can do? Every year dowry rate is increasing. Parents also agree to children eloping.

**Participant 7** We are more responsible towards our family. We work hard in fields, can't think about further studies. We can't go and settle elsewhere.

#### On Challenges of Child Marriage

**Participant 4** Dowry is main concern for the groom. In our community groom has to pay bride's father. Bride's side fixes the amount. The dowry rate is rising every year. If we delay marriage, we have to give heavy dowry.

**Participant 3** Elders pressure and social pressure is there.

**Participant 5** Elopement culture among the tribes is also one reason.

Box 8: FGD with Post Graduate Students in Bihar

### Postgraduate University Students Of Sociology

Excerpts From FGD in Magadh University, Bodhgaya, District Gaya, Bihar.

Participant Nos 8, Aged 21 – 38.

#### On Reasons for Child Marriage

**Participant 2** Main reason for child marriage is lack of education, because people are illiterate they cannot understand how badly child marriage affects the lives of people. We are educated now and we can educate our children because we know how important it is to get education. It is illegal but still it is so prevalent in many parts of India. Sometimes it is because of the tradition because they think that my parents have done that, I have done that, and so I will marry my children.

**Participant 3** Mentality of people in villages is still same due to lack of education no awareness of the things going around the world; they are so much into their own world that they think whatever they are doing is correct.

**Participant 6** Child marriage is not good. Because many people try to copy others who marry before the age of 18 years ... it leaves bad effects on the people who are doing it. The reasons are different for child marriage like lack of education, lack of resources, high demand of dowry, etc.

- Participant 7** Child marriage does not give any benefit but it takes away all good things that we can do with our lives. I married at the age of 13 because my grandfather wanted to see my wedding before his death. So my father married me. I wanted to study and fortunately my husband is allowing me to study so I'm still studying.
- Participant 8** Child marriage is in no way a good option, rather it is the beginning of all problems. Reason for child marriage is tradition mainly because in Bihar everyone marries at a very young age and if any girl is studying and if she is above 25 then it's very difficult to get groom for her as boys also marry in childhood and then people ask for heavy dowry which parents cannot afford so they marry their daughter in their childhood.
- Participant 6** Child marriage affects the life of a woman badly as she has to bear pregnancy at a very early age and it's noticed that couple who marry in childhood have repeated pregnancies and so the women get badly affected.
- Participant 7** Child marriage snatches our childhood from us, our right to education. It leaves us vulnerable to all bad things. It made me vulnerable as I was just 8<sup>th</sup> class pass and wanted to study but I could not as I was pregnant when I was 14 and then again I was pregnant when I was 16 so I could not study till later. I wasted these many years so I feel child marriage is not at all good.
- Participant 3** Due to child marriage men also get affected not just women because men have to handle all the responsibilities at the age when they are expected to study but they cannot as they are married. They have to look for employment and work on lower grade jobs so earning is less and instead of improving their status they go down and down.

## Excerpts from life stories

*"I could not pass class 10th because of the burden of household chores on me. I requested my father to give me one more chance but he got me married. They thought I have no interest in studies and its better if I am married."*

– Sitara, 21, married at 17, Munger, Bihar

*"My parents had been married when they were children but I thought that my mother would understand my position... Anwar (brother) was of the opinion that girls should be able to run a household efficiently and that their alliances must be arranged before they became older."*

– Karima, 24, married at 15, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

*"There was somebody required who will take care of household and farming work. My mother could not manage it alone so they got me married."*

– Naresh, 18, married at 15, Barwani Madhya Pradesh

Tradition and poverty are often considered to be main causes for the practice of child marriage. The findings of this study reveal the pressure of authoritarian and patriarchal social structure in rural and urban settings compelling child marriage of girls. In a society that typically undervalues the role of girl child and considers marriage as their 'ultimate destiny', cultural practices, socio-economic backwardness and societal apathy have contributed to the sustenance of the norm. The causes mentioned by the informants are fundamentally entwined with structural inequalities, such

as poverty and deprivation; constrained gender norms within the patriarchal system; a negative attitude towards sexuality and a desire to control young people, especially young women. Decisions around marriage are often full of anxiety, due to marriage's centrality and the rigid norms governing it; any threat to these norms can feel like a threat to society itself. What can seem like a personal decision made by an individual family is, in fact, entangled in a vast web of structural and social considerations. Neither any particular custom nor any specific norm stimulates people belonging to different socio-cultural backgrounds to perform child marriage. Rather, due to a combination of traditional and modern factors, child marriage itself has become a tradition today. It is true that the practice cannot be arrested legally or superficially unless the people and particularly the fathers, mothers and elders perceive the issue as their 'problem'. It is obvious that in the tradition bound peasant societies, the pace and quality of social change is also sluggish.

Our study shows that sexuality appears to be the contested ground on which child marriage is pivoted. Traditional patriarchal notions of controlling girls, women's, and young men's sexuality through marriage are today being contested by youth much more visibly. The argument of tradition and poverty is often made by elder persons in the community. The youth however have emphasized that they wish to make their own choices in marriage and are compelled to elope and marry on their own to defy customary expectations and repressions.

School retention of adolescents is an issue that needs to be addressed with sensitivity. Youth (men and women) in this study reported regret for leaving studies and for rushing marriage or being forced in marriage before completion of their education.

**One of the important reasons for the continuation of child marriages despite a punitive legislation is that there is weak implementation of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006.**

Weak enforcement and lack of fear about breaching this law are also important in the continuation of child marriage. In this study it was found that people were aware of the legal marriageable ages both for boys and girls but they continue to talk of tradition and personal circumstances to explain why marriage was solemnized. Moreover in FGDs conducted in the states it was also seen that government functionaries including the police and Panchayat members are very well aware of child marriage practices but they hardly take any steps to stop such marriages or take punitive action against it. Most NGOs also refrain from addressing the issue upfront.

The causes as per our understanding are related to a patriarchal context within which marriage is considered to be compulsory, girls are considered burdensome and active career choices and investment in girls education is not a priority in families. Marriage continues to be their final settlement. High regard for virginity and sexual control of girls before marriage compels parents to engage in surveillance. This restricts the autonomy of young people who sometimes opt for child marriages of choice as a better option. Particular situations of threat and instability such as riots, communal violence and ethnic and religious conflicts, disasters and natural calamities, such as floods, also lie as important considerations for parents to marry their children and ensure girls protection. We are of the opinion that some of the so called causes perceived by informants can at best be considered to be immediate motivations for child marriage. The cause lies in devaluation of the girl child. Women and girls are expected to be submissive and their role within as well as outside the family is regulated by elders and traditional patriarchal norms and this can be ensured by marrying girls very young.

Decision-making power is in the hands of the elder males who continue to further child marriages so as to control young men and women through obedience to patriarchal regulations. Mothers of the house follow the male ideology of getting the daughters married as children thus playing their own role in furthering the patriarchal organization of our society.

## Excerpts from life stories

*“I was ten years old when I was married. My grandfather was the Sarpanch of the village and he had given his word to my wife’s family. Even though I did not want to get married and voiced the same to my family I had to give in and get married so as not to insult my grandfather.”*

- Jaggat, 25, married at 10, Udaipur, Rajasthan

*“For nearly one month my life was hell. When my parents found out that I had refused to marry Shiv they beat me. My mother was more violent than my father and she was more adamant than my dad to get me married to Shiv. I was not allowed to go out of the house and my parents destroyed my mobile phone in anger to ensure that I had no contact with Akhil. There was also an onslaught of emotional blackmail. My father knows that I am stubborn by nature and when the beatings did not help he tried reasoning with me and begged me to not ruin the family name.”*

- Kranti, 20, married at 17; Udaipur, Rajasthan

### Box 9: Critique of the Legal Situation on Child Marriage

## Critique Of The Legal Situation On Child Marriage

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 was enacted to prohibit and prevent child marriages. Yet there are gaps and problems in the law that needs to be addressed. The Act has declared child marriages to be voidable at the discretion of the parties. One of the contracting parties to the marriage (the boy or the girl married) may file a petition for annulment of the marriage any time before completing two years after attaining majority. It is very unlikely that children would ever be able to go to these lengths to get legal recourse. Many of the respondents in our study, especially girls were illiterate and disempowered. Instances of strong control over these girls from their in-laws were found. In such a context, girls seeking legal remedies to get their marriage declared void seems almost impossible. The Act only provides for three conditions where a marriage would be considered void ab initio thereby validating customary traditional child marriages till an express remedy is sought to invalidate them by the contracting party.

There are variations in customary laws. Muslim personal law provides the valid age for marriage to be at puberty. Under the Christian Marriage Act, 1872, marriage of minors is not considered invalid as long as consent of the minor’s guardian has been obtained. It is only under the Special Marriage Act, 1954 that child marriages are considered void.

Then there is the question of child marriages which occur out of love where the partners end up eloping without the consent of their parents. Given the emerging current scenario where boys and girls are exercising choice in the marriage against the wishes of their families many a time based on inter-caste dynamics, there have been many cases where families have approached courts to file cases of abduction against the groom, and sought custody of their daughter from courts. Courts have dealt with these questions in individual case laws, and in some instances ruled that girls aged 16 or 17 who have voluntarily chosen to be married cannot be forced to return to their parents. (Singh: 2013)

The Act does not provide for compulsory registration of marriages. The Central Government has under the Compulsory Registration of Marriages Act mandated that state governments take steps to make registration of marriages compulsory. However, this has been left to the initiative of state governments with very few states making registration mandatory (Gupta: 2012).

Box 10: FGD with Young Male Volunteers of NYKS in Rajasthan

## Young Male Volunteers of the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan

Excerpts from an FGD Conducted in Village Dhundi, Block Gogunda, District Udaipur, Rajasthan.

Participant Nos 9, Aged 20 – 28 Years.

### On Child Marriage and Village Governance

**Participant 7** There should be stricter implementation of the law. Gram panchayats should be made responsible to identify vulnerable children who may be married off by the parents. The problem is that panchayat members and sarpanches don't see child marriage as a problem due to how entrenched it is in our culture.

**Participant 4** Sarpanches don't complain because they need votes so they don't want to fight against child marriage. It would make them unpopular in the village.

### On Aata-Saata and its Problems

**Participant 5** Most child marriages happen in *aata saata*.

**Participant 8** I got married in an *aata-saata* marriage. I had refused the marriage to my parents. My in-laws were keen though. My sister was getting married and I was being married to her sister-in-law. Under pressure, I agreed to being engaged but I said I will not marry now. I was 21 but the girl was 17. I did not want to get married to such a young girl. But eventually I gave in because my sister would have to suffer the consequences of my refusal. Such customs and traditions need to be broken. My parents were afraid that we will lose a daughter but our son might remain single. I have a daughter now but there are problems in my marriage.

**Participant 4** It's rare that relatives would support children who say they do not wish to get married.

**Participant 8** When I was to get married and refused the whole village went against me. People began telling me that they will not visit our family and that they will break all social ties with my family. So it wasn't just my family that I came under pressure from but also the whole village. After marriage I did not want to sleep with my wife as she was so young. But then there is family pressure to produce children and begin a family so now I have a daughter.

Box 11: FGD with Police Personnel in Bihar

### Police Officers and Constables from Mahila Thana

Excerpts from FGD Conducted in Kotwali Police Station, Bhagalpur, Bihar

Participant Nos 7, Ages Not Revealed

#### On Causes Of Child Marriage

**Male Officer** Everyone thinks that only parents are responsible for child marriage but children are also at fault. They fall in love and then elope. If a girl is found then her parents file a case against the boy for kidnapping their daughter even if it's out of mutual consent.

**Female Officer** Girls belonging to poor families are married off in their childhood. They are not being sent to school so they are preferred to be married as soon as possible.

**Female Constable** I got married when I was 12. I married my daughter when she was 14. There are no problems.

#### Don't you know that according to law it's illegal to marry a daughter before 18?

**Female Constable** I know but how does that matter. I had no job then. I was very poor I preferred marrying her when she was a child. The boy was not demanding a lot. It was convenient for me.

**Female Officer** Yes dowry is one of the main reasons here. It is illegal but it's a custom here. Nobody says anything against dowry. It is done here.

**Male Constable** Lack of education and awareness among people is another reason for child marriages.

### *Impact of Child Marriage*

The impact of child marriage is manifold. Illiteracy, lower education, less employability due to limited skills, poor sexual and reproductive health, forced sex, social isolation due to limited access to support networks, violence in marriage and psychological and economic dependencies are some of its consequences for girls. Girls and boys exposed to child marriage may be vulnerable to chronic and extreme poverty due to their unpreparedness to take adult socio-economic roles (Warner, Stoebenau and Glinski: 2014).

Child marriage is a violation of individual's human rights and an impediment to children's growth (Human Rights Law Network: 2009). Yet, while getting married in childhood negatively impacts both girls and boys, it is girls who suffer the consequences with more intensity as their vulnerabilities in marital home are many. There is pressure on young brides to conceive as soon as they are married. Lack of knowledge about contraception and lack of agency to refuse sexual intercourse leads to repeated pregnancies at an age when their bodies are not fully developed. This puts them at the risk of complications in pregnancy and childbirth (Pande, Kurz, Walia, MacQuarrie and Jain: 2006; Jejeebhoy, Santhya and Acharya: 2010). Forced out of education young girls remain dis-empowered and dependent on the families of their in-laws. Most of these girls are overwhelmed with household



work and do not get an opportunity to pursue education after marriage (Kakkar: 2009). They remain unskilled and economically and psychologically dependent on their husband and his family. The most important setback to girls because of child marriage is therefore their personal growth and education (Plan Asia Regional Office and ICRW: 2013).

Children who are married were found to be twice as likely to drop out of school as those who remain unmarried (Bhabha and Kelly: 2013). Poor households prefer sending boys to school and keeping the girls home to assist parents in farms and with the cattle. Girls who study for longer get married at a later age (ICRW and UNFPA: 2013). It was also reported in our study that girls who lived and studied in hostels and ashram schools were able to delay their age at marriage. While being in school is no guarantee of delaying marriage, dropping out of school becomes an additional reason for parents to marry off their daughters (Verma, Sinha and Khanna: 2013). Marriage has been found to be a barrier to continuing education because of the expectation that girls should devote themselves to childbearing and household chores. Receiving formal education beyond higher secondary levels of education is found to delay the age at marriage. Yet there are many impediments to this. In households that are poor, girls are withdrawn from school to help with household work. Lack of a secondary school in the village also forces girls to drop out of school. Fear and concerns regarding safety of girls while traveling to far away villages for school prompts parents to withdraw them from schools. Girls who were married in childhood reported that their peers teased them about being married which led to feelings of shame and withdrawal from school. They reported an inability to engage and integrate with the social group in school they had before marriage, making them hesitant to continue schooling.

Girls and boys both reported dropping out of school as a critical factor for their parents to marry them off. Young married boys and girls also reported that the increase in responsibilities towards family after marriage greatly reduced the options of education for them. Marriage creates an expectation of responsible behaviour and young people's involvement in providing for their families, thus leaving their village to study in institutions far away was not an option anymore, so secondary schooling was dropped by default.

The fact that girls education is not valued, rather they are encouraged to groom themselves in traditional notions of femininity defined through their identification with household means that child brides more than child grooms lose the opportunity to learn skills to improve their lot and earn an income to lift themselves out of poverty and dependency.

In fact, setback to education or the cessation of it was found to be both- a cause and an impact of child marriage.

What is encouraging however is that our research has found a changing attitude in certain sections of the society about the value of educating girls. Some girls have reported support from their marital homes to continue their education. (Refer life stories of Sitaradevi from Bihar and Bina from West Bengal and Kranti from Rajasthan).

Most of the informants who were married in childhood and had little or no education had aspirations for their own children to be educated and not live the same lives as them. Life stories show how some girls who married in childhood and faced challenges of poverty and patriarchy, insisted subsequently to continue their education and change their lot through sheer persistence. (Refer life story of Swara from Telangana and Karima's from Andhra Pradesh).

## Excerpts from life stories

*"I feel if I would have not dropped out of school and continued with my studies I could have escaped getting married in childhood. When I look back I feel it was much better if I had studied"*

- Anita, 24, married at 14, Hooghly, West Bengal

*"I married against my parents' wishes and so there was no question of going back, I wanted to study but my husband did not want me to, since he had studied till class 9. After two years of much suffering I decided to run away, deliver my child and complete my nursing course. All this while I lived with an old woman of my village who was a dai (midwife)."*

- Swara, 19, married at 14, Mehboobnagar, Telangana

*I regret getting married because now I have to do much household and farming work while continuing to do my studies."*

- Rukamani, 17, married at 14, Barwani, Madhya Pradesh

*"I was never much interested in studies. When I was 12 years old I was studying in class 8th and fell in love with one of my school mates. After a few months of being in a relationship we could not resist each other and the infatuation. I always wanted a fairytale like ending. Carried away by such thoughts we eloped... You only realise that you have taken the road too soon when you are already too late. I was too young to realise it in time. Now I do not see any good thing in marriage. Marriage as a whole is a disaster as per my experience. It keeps getting worse day by day. It is purely darkness to me."*

- Debina, 23, married at 13, Barpeta, Assam

Box 12: FGD with Women from the Banjara Community in Rajasthan

### Women from Banjara Community

Excerpts from an FGD Conducted in Village Girdharipura, Block Mavli, District Udaipur, Rajasthan.

Participant Nos 8, Aged 16 – 40 Years.

#### On the Role of Education

- Participant 1** Education is very important.
- Participant 3** (Points to P2) She dropped out of school after marriage and is now filling an application to continue her education.
- Participant 6** I left studies after my marriage. My in-laws want me to study but my parents don't feel it's important. I am still living at my parent's house. My *gauna* is yet to happen. Maybe I will get to study once I go to my in-laws home.
- Participant 2** Parents are afraid to send their girls to school because they're afraid that she'll get swayed by bad company and bring shame to the family. If there is a school in the village, parent's send children to the village school. The school here is only till class 8<sup>th</sup>. So most girls are educated till class 8<sup>th</sup> only.
- Participant 3** Lots of women who were child brides in this village have applied for open school admissions to finish education at least up to class 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Participant 4** I was also married in childhood. Parents never took my consent or enquired about my wishes. Parents did what they did out of good intentions. But I feel that my daughter should be educated and have a job so she is independent. My daughter goes alone to school which is in a town around 10-12 kilometers from here. I have complete faith in my daughter and am not afraid that she might run away with someone. I also sent her for self-defense classes run by a local NGO (Vikalp) in our village. They taught her judo and karate for three months. The organization calls young girls for trainings on various subjects and I always encourage my daughters to go. They are also fearless and don't hesitate to travel alone. One has to have faith in their upbringing and trust their daughters. I sent my daughters for computer classes also. It helped them gain a lot of self-confidence.

The impact of child marriage on adolescent health must look into a wide range of issues including their general sense of well-being, physical and mental health, and reproductive health, a satisfying and safe experience of sexual relations with the choice to plan pregnancies and use contraception.

Our study showed high prevalence of anemia and malnutrition among women who reported weakness due to early and repetitive pregnancies, abortions and complications in pregnancies. Psychological impact was reported in terms of depression, unexplained anxiety, and lack of confidence and over dependence.

More than half the girls /women interviewed for their life stories reported physical, psychological and sexual abuse on a routine basis. Men in our study who were married before eighteen talked of psychological stress and violence due to not being able to address expectations of themselves and family.

Life stories show that girls felt pressured to reproduce soon after marriage and to give birth to a male child. Several reported difficulty with their first pregnancy.

Most informants reported using no form of contraception, a finding that echoes findings of other studies done in India (Santhya, Ram, Acharya, Jejeebhoy, Ram, and Singh: 2010). Studies have found that women who marry as children are less likely to use contraception than those who married as adults (Raj, Saggurti, Balaiah, and Silverman: 2009).

Our study sample suggests that even though women may know about contraception they do not have the agency to use it as the decision to use or not use contraception lies with the husbands. Child marriage reduces the control of women on pregnancy and family planning. (Raj et al: 2009). Birth of girl child makes them vulnerable to repeated pregnancies in the hope of a male child. Previous research has shown that adolescents who are married have poor fertility outcomes, frequent pregnancies, high fertility and less use of contraception. This inadvertently leads to poor maternal health outcomes.

In our study, the youngest age at first pregnancy was reported as 12 years and the average age at first pregnancy was between 15 to 18 years. Repeated pregnancies, loss of pregnancy in the form of stillbirths, miscarriages and complications during child birth were reported.

Girls who are married at such a young age also do not get the opportunity to develop a sense of self. Many of them reported suffering in silence and having no particular dreams. Mental health impact is subtle and indirect but widely reported in this study.

## Excerpts from life stories

*"I lost my first child 12 months after delivery which had so much impact on me because I was very depressed. Those were the times when I was physically weak as well."*

- Iralil, 23, married at 17, East Khasi Hills Meghalaya

*"I lost my first child in the third month of pregnancy. It was a miscarriage. I had so much of pain in my body and there was less haemoglobin."*

- Peenaz, 21, married at 15, Murshidabad, West Bengal

*"I had three abortions."*

- Reema, 19, married at 16, Dhar, Madhya Pradesh

*"I experienced four miscarriages consecutively which worsened my health. I was emotionally weak. Those were one of my darkest times."*

- Binata, 23, married at 17, Kamrup, Assam

*"My pregnancies were smooth but I had trouble breastfeeding both my daughters. I breastfed my first daughter for about 6 months but could not breastfeed the other at all. She was given milk powder by the ASHA."*

- Jyotsna, 26, married at 12, Mehaboobnagar, Telangana

*"Right from the start, I was very unhappy in my marriage. Firstly, my husband insisted on having sexual intercourse way too frequently. I always feared that I would become pregnant. Next, my mother-in-law would constantly nag me about my inability to keep a clean and tidy house. My husband was always supported by my mother-in-law. I got to know that my mother-in-law would give him extra money each time he would want to go out with his friends to drink. I did not like all this and my helplessness kept growing."*

- Karima, 24, married at 15, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

*"They wanted a male child and I kept having daughters and I had three daughters within a span of five years. My in-laws used to keep nagging. What could I do if I had only daughters?"*

- Anu, 25, married at 14, Hooghly, West Bengal

*"I am unhappy with my marriage because my husband forces me for sex. My mother-in-law also tortures me, demanding that I bring land from my parents because I was not able to pay dowry."*

- Dia, 15, married at 13, Mehaboobnagar, Telangana

*"I never had any knowledge about contraceptives and I am unsure about my husband's awareness on this so we never used any contraceptives. There were no Asha workers to explain us anything about family planning and how to take good care in pregnancy"*

- Geeta, 25, married at 14, Gaya, Bihar

*"In our Barale community, elders of family expect that bride should conceive within a year of marriage. They also have misconception of contraceptives. They believe that it is not good for health. Despite that, my husband uses Condoms which he buys from the chemist shop in the Block headquarters."*

- Rukamini, 14, married at 17, Sawariyapani, Madhya Pradesh.

*"I never wanted that sterilization, I love kids. Moreover it's against my religion. I feel guilty as I have committed a sin and maybe I will not get Jannat after my death. It has given me lot of tension. I had minor heart attack thinking about not attaining Jannat."*

-Baby Jinah, 26, married at 14, Bhagalpur, Bihar.

*I feel responsible for my husband's happiness... Quite naturally, it is my responsibility to make him feel better each day as he has gone through quite a tragic phase. As for me, I am happy that my in-laws and husband give me enough space around the house and treat my children with great care and fondness. I hope to make them happier by producing a male child someday."*

-Jyotsna 26, married at 12, Mahbubnagar, Telangana.

The study shows lack of opportunities for women in the rural economy. Women who participated in this research were engaged in low skill, less paying activities such as agricultural labour, bidi-making, handicrafts making, manual labour etc. Most of them reported not to have paid work before marriage. Child marriage appears to make them vulnerable due to economic dependency and lack of options due to limited skills. Child brides grow up to be women confined largely to the household, perceived as a liability with limited economic role (Ghosh and Roy: 1997). Not only was pregnancy and childbirth prioritized by women and in-laws over employment, but our research found that husbands and in-law exercise much control on paid work outside the home.

Child marriage and the compulsions of sustaining a family were specially articulated by men to have jeopardized their future. However life stories of men show them to have more familial support to continue their education and employment goals. In some cases, while men migrated to different places for work, women stayed behind to take care of the household.

### Excerpts from life stories

*“Whenever I meet my friends who are now officers, I feel small. My friends talk about their adventures and the milestones they have achieved and I am often left silent. I was married during my childhood by my parent’s insistence after I failed at the National Defence Services Exams. My wife conceived in the first year of marriage. Everybody was happy but I must now focus on earning whatever I can. I feel responsible for my family and want to protect them. I simply wish that I can somehow save and own an auto-rikshaw.”*

– Salim, 23, married at 17, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

*“I wanted to study further and appear for exams for government jobs. But the pressure to support my family is heavy. I don’t have the time to study... I don’t like my wife. I was forced to get married by my grandfather. Since last 4-5 years I am living with her but I am not happy. My wife does not know how to behave or talk properly. I feel embarrassed because she is uneducated.”*

– Jaggat, 25, married at 10, Udaipur, Rajasthan.

*“I married out of love when I was 17. Marriage means responsibility. Before marriage if I did not get work, it was not stressful, now I worry much about my wife and my family. My wife and I waited for 2 years before we consummated our marriage as she was only 16 when I married her.”*

– Baba, 21, married at 17, Murshidabad, West Bengal. 

Women informants of this study expressed aspirations for skill development and opportunity to work in small scale enterprises to improve their family’s economic conditions. Some of them were already part of self-help groups and working towards making a better future for their children.

Protective factors in terms of the impact of child marriage were seen to be continuing education post marriage, marital family’s support to girl’s education, being part of women’s collectives and being distanced from the marital family due to separate living, including staying in hostels.

## Excerpts from life stories

*“I believe that women have as much right to earn and have careers, should they choose to do so. This is why I encouraged and supported my wife (Lekhi) to stand in the Ward Panchayat elections.”*

- Gopal, 23, married at 14; Udaipur, Rajasthan.

*“There is much to learn from these meetings. They talk to us about violence against women. I don’t actively work with Vikalp but I like attending their meetings. They tell us about ongoing social issues, benefits of schemes etc. Useful information which might not have otherwise reached us.”*

- Kranti, 20, married at 17; Udaipur Rajasthan.

Girls not complying with normative notions of beauty felt that this protects them despite its challenges. So while beauty became vulnerability for child marriage, lack of beauty or even disability was presented by one informant as the reason for delay in marriage of her sister.

## Excerpts from life stories

*We are five sisters and four of us got married during childhood. One of our sisters is still unmarried at the age of 21 years because she is partially visually impaired. But she is not doing her graduation.”*

- Shazia, 22, married at 12; Murshidabad West Bengal

Another enabling factor in mitigating impact of child marriage was that some mothers who had suffered were more vocal in supporting their daughters to carve out a life of their own.

In terms of our learning from life histories about impact, it is important that interventions should be designed so as to address a life cycle perspective towards child brides and their vulnerabilities and not merely focus on the issue of reproductive health and contraceptive choice. Long term investments in girls education, skill building and employment opportunities will make for all round empowerment of girls and women irrespective of child marriage or not and would enable them to realize and enjoy their human rights. Child marriage deprives children of their freedom and it is needed that girls are enabled to claim their individual rights without guilt or violence against them.

It is our view that the full impact of child marriages may be understood by looking at the young people’s reflexive assessment of their own lives, the realization of their dreams of past and their wishes for their future. Our research looking at the age group 15-29 gives the possibility for us to hear this assessment of now young adults who were challenged by marriage in adolescence and childhood.

Adolescence is a very tender age. In this phase of life young minds dream and aspire to fly high. They have dreams related to their education, employment and relationships. Peers, romance and

friends approval are important for adolescents. Child marriage, whether self-arranged or arranged by parents compels people to put their dreams on a back seat and focus on fulfilling expectations of their families.

We need to understand that aspirations are not merely about education and career, but about the freedom to decide their own destinies (Save the Children: 2014). This we deny to our adolescent girls and boys if we marry them young or force them to jump into marriage of their choice before they are ready to take its responsibilities just because we threaten them with forcing our choice on them.

### Some Aspirations that Policy Makers may help in giving wings to:

Box 13: Aspirations of Women

#### Aspirations that Need Wings

*“I want to study and become independent. I want to make my career in dancing and acting. I am still studying and my husband supports me in my studies but not my dreams.”*

-Baby, 16, married at 16, Homemaker; Murshidabad, West Bengal

*“My husband has always been encouraging of my ambitions. Therefore, I will soon enroll at the government college for girls to complete my intermediate studies; then go on to finish BA and maybe one day, I may just become a teacher.”*

-Avanthika, 18, married at 17, Homemaker, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

*“I want to study but my in-laws refused to give me money to fill the form. My father-in-law says I should stay at home and work instead of studying. His word on everything is usually the final word in our home. Initially my husband said its okay if I study further but when he realised it'll cost money he refused. Education is not a priority in my in-laws home. Even if I study now I doubt it will make much of a difference to my life. My in-laws don't let me do anything. I can't go out when I want. I can't meet who I want without their permission. They're not even willing to support me to study further. I don't believe they'll let me work even if I do finish studies till class 12th.”*

- Subhadra, 20, married at 5, Homemaker; Udaipur, Rajasthan

*“I wanted to learn tailoring. But I don't have the money to learn tailoring. Even if I got the money from my father to learn there is no one to take care of my children while I go to learn tailoring.”*

- Anita, 24, married at 14, Sweeper, Hoogly, West Bengal

*“I have learnt tailoring so I want to do something with it from home. I want to improve the living conditions of my home”.*

- Anu, 25, married at 14, Handicraft making; Hoogly, West Bengal

*“An initiative in our locality has been started. We are 10 women in the group. It's been a year now and we have started saving Rs 55 per person per month. The women are taught several skills and they can use them to start some business venture. If the government helps us get a loan of say 3-5 lakh against that money we can start up something in our own homes. If we get 5 lakh as a group we will get fifty thousand per person and we can start up something- I can start a new shop of my own.”*

- Shazia, 22, married at 12, Homemaker, Murshidabad, West Bengal

*“I am undergoing training in livelihoods. We are taught to make stuff from jute like bags, mats, etc. Such kind of trainings should be more accessible so that girls can be empowered.”*

- Peenaz, 21, married at 15, Homemaker; Murshidabad, West Bengal

*“After I settled here, I completed intermediate studies and have enrolled at the local college for BA. I want to become a policewoman so I will study as much as I can.”*

- Karima, 24, married at 15, Anganwadi helper, Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

*“Although my husband’s earning can manage the family, I want to do something which will give me pleasure as well as earn me money.”*

- Nandini, 19, married at 17, Homemaker, Kamrup, Assam

*“I would at least make sure my daughters pass their Higher Secondary. By then they would be mature enough and have a mind of their own to decide what is good for them.”*

- Anita, 24, married at 14, Sweeper, Hooghly, West Bengal

*“I want my daughter to be educated and I wouldn’t want her to be married in her childhood. If she wants to develop some skill or work I would encourage her to work.”*

- Bina, 23, married at 15, Homemaker, Murshidabad, West Bengal

*“My husband and I have decided that we will educate Sunanda (daughter) so that she can become something. These days there are many avenues for girls especially in cities like Kurnool and Hyderabad. If she wants to study further than school, then we will encourage it. My dream of becoming a teacher may not have come true but I will teach my daughter how to be a good person and respect her elders.”*

- Nagamma, 18, married at 15, Homemaker; Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh

#### Box 14: Aspirations of Men

### Aspirations of Men

*“When I was in school I was an average student so I moved towards farming but I could not earn well. I want to pursue Bachelors in Computer Sciences as I found this is the profession which can give me financial independence and I can earn well so that I can support my wife’s education.”*

- Kishor, 18, married at 15, Agricultural Labour, Barwani, Madhya Pradesh

*“I feel bad that child marriage has become an obstacle in my career, when I see my friends are still studying or hold good jobs. Child marriage has given lot of responsibilities on my shoulders but still I need more academic qualification because these days one cannot survive without education.”*

- Donkumar Bamon, 23, married at 18, Teacher; East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

*“I would like to undergo some training in catering since we already have a food stall. We earn very less. If I have some skills I will get a better job may be.”*

- Sobiram, 20, married at 15, Cook, Murshidabad, West Bengal

*“I would want some assistance regarding preparation for civil service examination as because of marriage I really could not pay full attention to my career so if anyone can give some training in this then it will be a great help for me”.*

- Amit, 23, married at 16, Book-keeper, Gaya, Bihar

*“My daughter is going to study as much as she wants to. I will never pressurize her for marriage”.*

- Rahul, 22, married at 15, Cook; Bhagalpur, Bihar



We see in these narratives that both men and women who married in childhood regret their lack of education and skills and have aspirations for personal growth, fulfilling familial responsibilities and ensuring a better future for their children. These aspirations are related to access to education, skill upgradation, better jobs and economic empowerment, loans and the possibility to make a break.

### ***Power and Powerlessness: Agency or Victim Hood***

Researches show child brides to be particularly vulnerable due to lower educational attainment. They have lack of choice in choosing partners or husbands, greater restriction and lower autonomy in decision making, including sexual and reproductive choices involving use of contraceptives , planning of pregnancies etc as well as higher vulnerability to violence and coercion (Santhya, et. al: 2010). The findings in this research reflect that there is low level of education among girls who married in their childhood with most dropping out at secondary level. Some of the informants have also reported high level of restrictions on them in their marital homes. Life stories show lack of choice of partner, lack of choice in contraception and decisions regarding children, to be the lot of child brides. They are blamed for not producing male children or for repeated birth of female children or for not producing a baby in the first year of marriage. Many restrictions are placed on their mobility. Yet it must be noted that child marriage is not always out of societal/parental compulsions but it also emerges as a choice made by young people in some cases for their personal autonomy as this is an age where young people are feeling compelled and controlled especially regarding their mobility and sexual autonomy.

Several girls in this study spoke of their hormonal changes and deep attraction to their partners whom they felt compelled to marry against all rationality. Out of our sample of 42 girls/women who were married as children, 13 girls reported love marriage/ marriage by elopement, 14 arranged-consensual, 14 arranged non- consensual and 1 forced. Out of our sample of 15 boys / men, 9 reported love marriage / or marriage by elopement, 2 arranged consensual, and 4 arranged non-consensual.

There have also been some cases where girls reported gaining autonomy after marriage, especially freedom from surveillance and sexual control involving restricted movement outside homes. They talked of enjoying greater role in household decision making than was allowed in natal families. They talked of enjoying the sexual relationship with husbands. For some girls marriage meant gaining space and some agency which they did not enjoy in their natal home. In this sense marriage even if in childhood has the attractive side that it gives some young people the recognition of maturity. Marriage announces a coming of age which is otherwise denied to children and adolescents in India. Parental concern is experienced by many adolescents as excessive parental control and supervision, amounting to transgression of personal space of teenagers. Policy makers and interventionists addressing the menace of child marriages must recognize the generation gap and conflicts that fuel young adolescents to take this step without being prepared to handle the demands of marriage and family life. They need to address the community as a whole and bridge the gap between perspectives of the youth and the elders.

Life stories mention that child brides grew to be more assertive in time and even extended support to other women facing violence in their homes as they made their personal experiences of growing with adult roles that they were initially unprepared for.

Box 15: FGD with ASHA Workers in Andhra Pradesh

### ASHA Workers

Excerpts from an FGD Conducted in Village Pattikonda, District Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh.

Participant Nos 8, Aged 28 – 32 Years.

#### On Motivation to Work against Child Marriage

- Participant 1** Dear child, you do not realize but each and everyone who is sitting here had been married at a very young age. We have all faced many problems and our health has only improved recently. All of us want to stop child marriage. It goes against what God wants. It is not correct to marry young children when they should be studying or playing. How can a young child take care of others when s/he cannot take care of himself yet?
- Participant 2** I want this system to stop. I was married when I was a child and then I had to undergo many problems. But since the time I have become ASHA, my husband and family have started respecting me. Nobody now speaks badly to me. If there are any problems then they come to me for advice – both boys and girls. But I do not understand why boys do not respect their wives or sisters? They should and that will make all the difference.
- Participant 3** These marriages need to stop regardless of what the society thinks. Just see what the girl looks like after she is married - she looks weak and dejected and depressed. It is like she does not look forward to living her life. I used to be that way until I became ASHA. Now everyone respects me. And I will continue to do whatever I can to prevent more such cases from happening.
- Participant 4** I was also married in my childhood. I was 11 then. But I could not have done anything about it. My parents just wanted to wash their hands off me. I used to feel depressed all the time. My husband would beat me and then what could I have done? I had many miscarriages. Whenever I see other such cases, I try to console them. They confide in me now and I give them ideas as to how they can make their lives better.
- Participant 5** Although I was married during childhood, I did not face many problems except those related to pregnancies. But I think if everyone is in a race to become modern then they should first change their perceptions about marriage. Girls are humans not objects that can be bought or sold. I do not understand tradition and culture if somebody is suffering.
- Participant 6** I agree, how can tradition be justified when somebody is suffering?

All this points to a more complex situation regarding child brides' vulnerabilities in their families. Women are ambivalent about their 'forced' sexual experiences. In our research many women differentiated between child marriage being wrong but their spouse being good. Our life stories show the bargains adolescent girls make with patriarchy in the process of becoming women. By adhering to expectations and controls on their bodies and sexuality, by engaging in sexual activity and reproduction they validate their existence and value and earn their honour, making for a transformation from shy reluctant and fearful strangers to holding a place of their own. In this process they come closer to their husbands, improve their status in the marital family and come to wield power and influence in the household. This process is a process where there is much coercion and control, but there are also opportunities for autonomy and decision making (George: 2002).

In terms of youth sexuality we are at a critical juncture in India that is very challenging. On the one hand, there is what has been called as the liberalization and globalisation of sexuality (John: 1998), on the other hand, there are still strong taboos attached to it and there is alarm and consternation regarding the influence of 'western' sexual codes of conduct (Abraham: 2001). Male sexuality has always been seen as assertive and aggressive, sometimes extending beyond the boundaries of family in transgressive ways but female sexuality is constructed as passive and centering around marriage and spouse. Puberty is seen as the marker of female sexuality which is accompanied by greater control over girl's behaviour under the pretext of 'protecting' her and the family's 'honour'. Traditional notions of shame attached to the female body even when internalized by girls through socialization stand contested in the public realm by adolescent girls who resist parental restraints on sexuality and marriage (Phadke: 2005) .

Customary forms of marriages are not always forced marriages. These marriages are being challenged by young people or entered in with compromise or enthusiasm as it addresses youth need for love and sex. Young and adolescents are today claiming freedom and space to live their lives and desire yet patriarchal structures and practices still attempt to freeze young girls to idealized notions of femininity and female sexuality. While child marriage has been routinely forced upon young adolescent girls and boys by families and communities in a bid to control their sexuality along community codes of conduct, young people are also opting for child marriage of choice as an act of resistance. Though it starts with resistance and rebellion, our study also shows that many young people come to regret their child and adolescent marriages that fail to live up-to their aspirations of love and romance. The reality of living adult roles with little education and unskilled or less skilled employment makes them realize that their act of freedom and assertion was after all an act that was forced by the resistance and control of elders.

We must also keep in mind that even as more young people are choosing to opt for marriage of choice there is greater control exercised on them by communities through forced marriages and punishment by caste Panchayats or Khap Panchayats. The honour of the community and the family is made to be at stake. Defiance of marriage rules of caste endogamy and village exogamy can lead to severe consequences for young people, which may range from excommunication to even killing of the couple. And yet no stigma is attached to the perpetrators of these crimes (Vishwanath and Palakonda: 2011). The community is often of the opinion that these acts need to be punished so that it acts as a lesson to others. Although the practice was largely by the upper castes, the lower castes have also become sensitive about defending their own caste honour as they are denied any honour in relation to the upper castes (Chowdhry: 1998). Evidence show that instead of dilution of caste boundaries, the girls are married at a very young age in order to prevent inter-caste marriages. There are also increasing incidence of criminal cases being filed against boys by police for kidnapping and rape wherein young couples decide to elope and get married to partners of their choice. (Refer to Life story Nandini Das, Kamrup.)

In conclusion, we need to develop a culture sensitive approach to the deep rooted problem of child marriages that has its roots not only in tradition but in continuing gender inequalities in Indian society. In the post-colonial context of India there are many sensibilities around the diversity of religions and ethnicities and it is not easy to address issues of cultural identities and particularities along with safeguarding rights of girls and women on whom these identities are tagged. There is today also a crisis of inter-generational conflict , oppositions and contradictions between modernity and tradition, rural- urban, haves and have not . It is our responsibility that the rights of children and adolescents are not lost in the desperation of infighting between communities on grounds of insecurities and harmful traditions that deny children their human rights and crush their aspirations.

Box 16: FGD with School Staff and Parents in West Bengal

### School Staff and Parents

Excerpts from an FGD Conducted in Govindnagar High School, Canning, District 24 South Paraganas, West Bengal.

Participant Nos 8, Aged 30 – 56 Years.

#### On Effective Strategies to Delay Age at Marriage

- Participant 1** There is the government, there is the law, but what I feel is that the parents should be aware. Very often even without the knowledge of the school the families marry off their children. Later we come to know. If we come to know we can do something to prevent it. If some expert on the issue can come and speak on it, maybe a doctor or a social worker, and create awareness among the guardians then perhaps it is possible to create a small positive influence on them. This is my opinion.
- Participant 2** If another parent is giving their daughter away in marriage and I go to speak against it then they will say, it is my daughter and I am giving her hand in marriage, who are you to say anything. Then we can't say anything against it. There should be a system created by the village or the school such that this does not happen. We all can be vigilant about this. When you come to know about any such incidents happening we can go in a group and speak to the family of the child and request the family to stop such marriages.
- Participant 3** If we all decide that this problem needs to end we can end it. In one way aren't we all part of this crime as we attend and participate in such weddings. So if we go and talk to the family or even report to the authorities' maybe they would be able to take action against it.
- Participant 1** Reporting it to the police does not do much help. The police do not have the strength to take action in all the weddings that take place. The best way is to create awareness among the people. It is never possible to solve a problem through police and authority. We need to change the thought process of the people.

Box 17: FGD with School Teachers in Andhra Pradesh

### School Teachers

Excerpts from FGD in Village Chakrala, District Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh.

Participant Nos 8, Aged 25 – 32 Years.

- Participant 4** There are so many girls who come to us saying teacher we want to study but our parents are arranging our marriage. We don't want to marry.
- Participant 6** We also talked to the *Quazi* (Priest) that please do not marry them in their childhood. Quazi says he does not want to marry the girls who are under 18 as even he knows the law. But parent's say that the children don't have that much maturity to think for their best and parents have to arrange their marriage for their good. I wonder how these marriages get done despite the law.
- Participant 1** They read Quran and on the legal document they either put age below 18 or in some cases the marriages take place simply by saying "*Qubul Hai*" (*accepted*) *three times*.

**Participant 3** We do counseling sessions for both parents and students separately. We tell them why it is not good for them to marry their children before they turn 18 years of age. We also inform them about the side effects of marrying their children so early...health issues to psychological issues. We have started doing this from last two years but now even parents avoid to come to the school annual day functions because of our initiative.

Box 18: FGD with Single Muslim Males in Assam

### Single Men from Muslim Community

Excerpts from FGD in Village Haripur, District Barpeta, Assam.

Participant Nos. 8, Aged 23 – 33 Years.

#### On Dreams and Aspirations for Marriage

- Participant 4** Till now I am single as I am not yet ready to get married because I do not have a stable job where I can sustain the family. But when I get married I want the girl to be of my choice.
- Participant 2** I do not mind whether the girl is of my choice or my parent's choice, but she should be mature enough to understand the family situation since I come from a poor family and I want her to accept me and my family.
- Participant 8** I definitely want to get married but I do not want to marry now. As a sportsman I still want to pursue my career and make money and when I feel I am ready I will get married to a girl I love.
- Participant 1** I am 33 years old and do not have the scope to marry anymore. Initially I wanted to marry but due to unemployment I did not have the guts to ask a girl to marry me because I was scared that she will reject me. Now I am planning to take care of my parents and other siblings.

#### On Sex Education

- Participant 4** Sex education is what I personally feel, lacking in our lives. If we talk about this topic among friends, we take it as a joke and divert the topic.
- Participant 5** I feel it is the responsibility of every youth in the country to stop child marriage because they have power and energy to do things and make changes.
- Participant 1** In the village when I talked to my friends about anything related to sexuality most of them shy away. As a health worker I feel it is my responsibility to make everyone aware about the effects of child marriage and also the importance of sex education.
- Knowledge about contraceptives is important because one of my friend and his girlfriend had premarital sex without using contraceptives and the girl got pregnant and they had to elope and get married.
- Participant 7** An educated person will understand the importance of family planning and using contraceptives while having sex.

## Conclusions

To conclude we may say that this research points to three critical drivers of child marriage. A way forward requires us to focus on them so that our interventions may be successful in addressing the issue in consonance with needs and aspirations of youth of our country. These are:

**1. Traditions, norms and beliefs including customary forms of marriage:** These hinge on patriarchal control of young people's sexuality, especially girl's sexuality. These traditional beliefs rest on a false sense of security that marriage is held to provide to girls, boys and families. Although there is awareness about the issues associated with child marriage within the community, there is lack of sensitivity regarding what is its impact on the adolescents and youth. Community awareness and counseling for parents is necessary to change mass opinions and outdated attitudes towards the girl child and towards youth sexuality. Parental support is important in matters of adolescent and young girls and boy's education, choice of partner and marriage, hence counseling and support especially to parents of girl children becomes utmost important. Government representatives and administrative functionaries too very often adhere to the traditional norms and beliefs. Local administrative functionaries like the ASHA workers, the Panchayat, police and even religious leaders can play a critical role in sensitization of the community as well as ensuring that the PCMA 2006 get implemented strictly. Successful implementation of the PCMA 2006 requires community ownership of the legal provisions and adherence to government rules and legislations on compulsory registration of marriages and births. Conscientization of government functionaries against regressive traditional norms and beliefs will address the need for a responsive monitoring and evaluation system tracking the evolution of changing norms and good practices. Punitive measures may be needed against religious leaders, law enforcement agencies, Panchayat leaders, and other government functionaries who either officiate on such marriages or are complicit in it through negligence and lackadaisical attitude.

**2. Poverty and Economy of Scale:** Child marriage is a strategy to cope with high dowries, economic instability or threat in families and economic costs of undermining traditional norms. Girls are perceived as burdens and little investment in their education and careers is made. Families opt for marriages especially when girls and boys drop out of schools and marriage comes to be seen as a settlement. Teachers can inspire young girls to continue their education and should encourage community and families to send their children to schools. The negative link between child marriage and preparedness for life in terms of education and employability should be an area that teachers must address towards sensitizing the community. It has also been seen in this research that residential schools and hostels can act as a protective measure to ensure that girls stay in schools and get married after completion of their education. The government needs to make more investment in measures such as this that will further the education of girls and prevent dropouts. For young people who drop out of school due to unavoidable circumstances there should be an increased focus on skill training and employment counseling availability at other venues. Special attention needs to be paid on young girls so that it may address parental and societal notions of girls being economic burdens and enable them to expand their potentials. This would require questioning of traditional gendered notions on women's roles within the household and the economy and giving them opportunities to make for practical and strategic transformations in their life trajectories. Strong political commitment and increased funding is needed by the government to address this problem through school retention, skills training and employment counseling for girls and boys.

**3. Resistance and exercise of 'choice' by adolescents who marry before turning 18 years old through elopement, so as to defy parental and community structures of control:** These marriages appear to be marriages of choice. However they are often marriages in haste and reaction and followed by regret in many cases. Young people who marry before 18 years of age out of

their personal choice also need support and possibilities for personal development to withstand the challenges of child marriage and their unpreparedness. Adolescents who get married before 18 years of age are very vulnerable and should be encouraged to continue schooling so as to reduce the impact of child marriage on their future educational and economic status. Voices of young people show that there is a definite rift between the notions of the older generation and the younger generation. This rift needs to be addressed. There is a need to acknowledge sexuality and sexual desire among young people and address them not by silencing or repressing these desires but by having open communication about them. Sexuality education among young girls and boys is necessary not just to give them knowledge about their bodies but also to eradicate the shame and stigma attached to their natural orientations and needs. There is a need to talk about safe sexual practices so as to promote healthier and safe sexual behaviour. There is need to understand sexuality outside the purview of marriage and reproduction and speak of issues such as understanding desire, bodies, gender identities and consent. Youth clubs can act as a good entry point to such dialogue and hence should receive administrative support to address issues of young people. Life skills training with special inputs on sexuality education can also help adolescents to be more self- confident, make rational choices protecting their self- esteem and effectively cope with difficult conditions.

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## APPENDIX I

### Quantitative Analysis of Sample

For the study over 100 women were randomly selected for life story documentation. This report presents narratives from 42 women. The inferences drawn below are largely indicative of the small sample and thus cannot be generalized.

Current Age of Women and their Age at Marriage <sup>25</sup>			
Current Age	Age at Marriage		Total
	<15 Years	16-18 Years	
15-19 Years	6 (.25)	11 (.61)	17 (.40)
20-24 Years	11 (.45)	6 (.33)	17 (.40)
25-29 Years	7 (.29)	1 (.10)	8 (.20)
Total	24 (1.0) (.57)	18 (1.0) (.43)	42 (1.0)

Age at Marriage and Education Achieved					
Sample	Current Educational Level				
	<1 Year of Formal Schooling	Up to Class 5	Up to Class 10	Up to Class 12	>Class 12
Women Married < 18	6 (.14)	13 (.31)	14 (.33)	8 (.19)	1 (.03)
Men Married Under 18	1 (.07)	2 (.13)	7 (.47)	3 (.20)	2 (.13)

Age at Marriage and Age at 1st Pregnancy						
Age at Marriage	Age at 1st Pregnancy					Total
	12-15 Years	16-18 Years	19-21 Years	22-24 Years	Yet to Conceive	
<15 Years	3 (1.00)(.13)	13 (.65) (.54)	4 (.36) (.17)	1 (1.00) (.04)	3 (.42) (.13)	24
16-18 Years	0	7 (.35) (.39)	7 (.64) (.39)	0	4 (.58) (.22)	18
Total	3 (1.00)	20 (1.0)	11 (1.0)	1 (1.0)	7 (1.0)	42

Current Age and Employment Status of Women				
Current Age	Current Employment Status			Total
	Self- Supporting	Earning Dependent	Non- Earning Dependent	
15-19 Years	0	3 (.18)	13 (.82)	16
20-24 Years	3 (.16)	4 (.22)	11 (.62)	18
25-29 Years	0	3 (.38)	5 (.62)	8
Total	3 (.07)	10 (.24)	29 (.69)	42 (1.00)

Current Age and Employment Status of Men				
Current Age	Current Employment Status			Total
	Self- Supporting	Earning Dependent	Non- Earning Dependent	
15-19 Years	2	1	1	4
20-24 Years	5	2	2	9
25-29 Years	1	1	0	2
Total	8(.54)	4(.26)	3(.20)	15(1.0)

- 1 Out of 42 women married before 18 years of age, 57% were married under 15 and the remaining 43% 18 were married between the ages 16-18. Among the 15 men 53% got married before completing 15 years of age; and the remaining 47% married at ages between 16 to 18 years. The youngest age at marriage for a girl in the sample was at 5 years, and for boys at 10 years of age.
- 2 Those girls and boys married before 18 had least education. About 50% of the girls have attended school even after marriage.
- 3 Child marriage invariably means early pregnancy – of those married before completing 15 years of age, 13% conceived while they were aged between 12 to 15 years; and 54% conceived between the ages 16 to 18 years.
- 4 Child marriage also meant that most of the women tend to be not gainfully employed and reported as dependent. As time progressed, a few women moved out of non-earning dependent status; and a few women reported being independent.
- 5 Child marriage among men also retards their status of being gainfully employed and independent – by virtue of being least educated, their ability to achieve self-supporting stage is delayed – mean age at reaching self-supporting state is around 24 years.

## APPENDIX II

### FGD Details and Group Context

Serial No	Group Constituency	No. of Participants	Age Range of Participants	Gender composition of the group	Venue
<b>ANDHRA PRADESH &amp; TELANGANA</b>					
1	Mothers in-law and married women belonging to the Lambadi community (ST)	8	30 – 38 years	Only females	Informant's home, Narsaipalli, Tanda , Telangana
2	University students	8	17- 21 years	Females and males	Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, Telangana
3	Members of a self-help group. Mixed group of Hindus and Muslims.	8	26- 32 years	Only females	Office of Bhavani Mahila Mandali, Pattikonda, Kurnool
4	Teachers of an all-girls school Mixed groups of OBC and Brahmins.	8	25-32 years	Only females	Zila Parishad All- girls School, Chakrala, Kurnool
5	Group of ASHA workers.	8	25- 32 years	Only females	Home of community leader, Pattikonda , Kurnool
6	Group of Anganwadi workers.	8	23-29 years	Only females	Informant's home, Pattikonda, Kurnool
7	Group of young mothers belonging to the Scheduled Caste.	8	17- 21 years	Only females	Informant's home, Chakrala, Kurnool
8	NGO Staff.	8	26- 35 years	Females and males	Office of an NGO named CONARE, Hyderabad, Telangana
<b>ASSAM</b>					
9	Married women belonging to the Muslim community	7	15-25 years	Only females	Open space in the village, Uttar Godhani, Barpeta District
10	Married men belonging to the Muslim Community	7	15-25 years	Only males	Open space in the village, Uttar Godhani, Barpeta District
11	Members of a <i>Mahila Samiti</i> belonging to the Muslim community	7	23-48 years	Only females	Home of member of a <i>Mahila Samiti</i> , Haripur, Barpeta District
12	Group of young unmarried men	6	20-32 years	Only males	Home of a field volunteer, Haripur, Barpeta District
<b>BIHAR</b>					
13	Members of a Self-help group	8	20-35 years	Only females	Home of the community co-ordinator of an NGO named Jeevika, Fatehpur village, Bhagalpur

14	Police personnel	7	<i>Ages not specified by participants</i>	Females and males	Kotwali police station (Mahila Thana), Bhagalpur
15	ASHA workers	8	20-35 years	Only females	Daradhi village, Bhagalpur
16	NGO staff	13	20-50 years	Females and males	Office of an NGO named Nidan, Bhagalpur
17	Women married before the age of 18	7	19-30 years	Only females	Jeevika Centre, Jhikhatiya village, Gaya
18	Members of the Panchayat	7	24-40 years	Females and males	Jeevika Centre, Shekhwara village, Gaya
19	University students of Sociology department	8	21-40 years	Females and males	Magadh University, Gaya
<b>MADHYA PRADESH</b>					
20	Group of married (before the age of 21 years) and unmarried boys belonging to the Barale tribal community.	8	15-21 years	Only males	Home of NGO volunteer, Sawariyapani-Kalakhet, District Barwani
21	Members of the Bhil and Barale tribal community.	6	18-50 years	Females and males	Open space in village, Sawariyapani – Morani, District Barwani
22	Group consisting of Anganwadi worker and school teachers belonging to tribal and OBC community.	6	35-50 years	Females and males	Government School, Sawariyapani
23	Group of FPA workers, ASHA workers and Anganwadi workers belonging to OBC community.	5	19-40 years	Females and Males	Office of Family Planning Association, Barwani
24	Group of adolescent females and one anganwadi worker.	6	15-50 years	Only females	Anganwadi Centre, Rahuti, Dhar
<b>MEGHALAYA</b>					
25	Women belonging to the Khasi (ST) community.	6	25-30 years	Only females	Home of anganwadi worker, Lad Nongkrem Village, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya.
26	School teachers belonging to the Khasi (ST) community.	7	23-36 years	Females and males	St. Denise Secondary School, Mawiong, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya.
<b>RAJASTHAN</b>					
27	Mixed group of NGO workers, panch members and sarpanches from Alwar district belonging to OBC, ST and General category.	8	20- 60 years	Only females	Training Centre of an NGO named Astha Sansthan, Bedla, Udaipur

28	All participants are volunteers with the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan. Belonging to ST, OBC and General categories.	9	20-28 years	Only males	Atal Seva Kendra, Dhundi, Block Gogunda, Udaipur District.
29	Mixed group of anganwadi workers and women (young and old) who were married under the age of 18 years. All belong to the banjara community.	8	14-45 years	Only females	Anganwadi Centre, Girdharipura. Block Mavli. District Udaipur.
30	Mixed group of rural women belonging to the following communities- OBC, Rajput, ST, OBC.	9	14- 60 years	Only females	Home of Ward Panch, Rawalia Khurd, Block Gogunda, Udaipur District.
<b>WEST BENGAL</b>					
31	Young girls who live in a shelter home belonging to Muslim and Hindu communities.	10	15-17 years	Only females	Sanlaap shelter home, Narendrapur, 24 South Paraganas
32	University students	6	20-25 years	Females and males	Jadavpur University Student Union Room
33	Group of married and unmarried men.	8	21-45 years	Only males	Jabala Action Research Organisation, Murshidabad,
34	Group consisting of the following- Panchayat members, ASHA workers, Angadwadi workers, Political leaders, School teachers, Religious leaders, NGO worker and housewives	10	32-60 years	Females and males	Home of an organisational volunteer, Hariharpara, Murshidabad
35	Young Unmarried Men, general and OBC category	7	20-25 years	Only males	FGD participant's home, Bikramgarh bazaar, Jadavpur
36	Residents of Satya Bharati Home. Girls belonging to hinu and muslim communities.	10	15-19 years	Only females	Satya Bharati Ballika Girl's Hostel, Hooghly
37	Mixed group of organizational workers and the village Pradhan	6	26-45 years	Females and males	Bagmari Mother and Child Development Mission office, Canning, 24 South Paraganas
38	Mixed group of school teachers and parents.	10	30-56 years	Females and males	Govindanagar High School, Canning, 24 South Paraganas
39	Young women who married before the age of 18 years	7	16-23 years	Only females	Youth club, Jafrabad village, Murshidabad
40	Mixed group of young unmarried boys and girls	15	15-25 years	Females and males	Youth club, Jafrabad village, Murshidabad

### **APPENDIX III**

#### **Ethical Guidelines Followed in the Research**

- This research was approved by the Board of Research Studies (BRS) at TISS. Fieldwork was undertaken after the clearance by the BRS.
- Individuals below the age of 15 years were not considered as part of the sample in order to avoid ethical concerns regarding interviewing children.
- The Researchers are all Post Graduate students of Women's Studies/ Anthropology/ Public Health/ Media and Culture Studies with experience in doing small research and community work.
- An intensive research training program on the methodology to be adopted in this study was conducted. This Program focused on training in Life history and conducting Focused Group Discussions. The training provided the researchers with skills of rapport and relationship building in the community in order to prevent antagonistic situations from arising between researchers and community members. Feminist insights in doing fieldwork also formed part of this training.
- An inventory of organizations working on the issue of child marriage and related issues was created. The field sites were identified beforehand so that movement of the researchers in the field was known. The researchers stayed in touch with each other and the project directors to keep them updated on their physical movements. Telephone and internet facilities were provided to them while in the field.
- The researchers worked with support from partner universities and community based organizations that extended goodwill and practical support to our team. In order to facilitate safe accommodation, boarding and lodging arrangements were made in partnering university guest-houses and NGO guest-houses as far as possible.
- None of the research staff had/ has any double allegiance or conflict of interest with this research project.
- Selection of cases was done with care towards representativeness.
- Utmost importance was placed on maintaining confidentiality of the participants and taking informed oral consent of the participants prior to conducting interviews. For this purpose an oral consent script was prepared, translated into regional languages and read out to participants before FGDs and interviews. Researchers ensured that participants understood the purpose of the study before beginning an FGD or interview.
- Since the sample of the study comes from a very wide demographic and not all were literate/ educated, oral consent was considered important. This helped in avoiding apprehensions among the participants and the community by insistence on written consent.
- Those who were willing to participate in our study were read out an oral consent script which explained the following: reasons for doing such research, the stakeholders in the research project, the reasons for recording and the importance of their consent. The participants were informed of their freedom to stop the interview at any point and terminate it if they so wished.



- This research was conducted with a consciousness to reduce any avoidable harm to the informants. Interviewing young women in their familial context was done carefully without jeopardizing their safety. Interviews were conducted individually with each participant.
- Also since this is a sensitive area of research, researchers were careful to discontinue data collection in case probes made for re-living of painful or traumatic memories. The research team was careful in addressing any risk of the participants feeling humiliated or their values being disregarded.
- In order to ensure clarity of the process, wherever needed, resource persons from local organizations who speak the local language were engaged for translating and explaining the process.
- All narratives in this report have pseudonyms to protect the identity of our informants.

## Glossary

<b>Akha Teej</b>	:	highly auspicious and holy day for Hindus (specially for solemnisation of marriage)
<b>Aata- Saata</b>	:	exchange form of marriage practice prevalent in Rajasthan
<b>Baniya</b>	:	name of a caste group who are traditionally traders
<b>Bhagoriya</b>	:	festival celebrated among tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh where young boys and girls elope and are customarily accepted as man and wife by the community.
<b>Dham</b>	:	temple
<b>Gauna</b>	:	custom of transfer of bride from natal home to marital home, usually associated with child marriages where girls stay at natal home till puberty.
<b>Gram</b>	:	village
<b>Gujjar</b>	:	gujjar is a pastoral agricultural ethnic group
<b>Hothat kori biya</b>	:	impromptu marriage
<b>Jaat walas</b>	:	caste and kin group
<b>Kali Bari</b>	:	temple
<b>Kali Mandir</b>	:	temple
<b>Khap</b>	:	clan or kinship group active mainly among the Jats of Western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana engaged in customary governance
<b>Mahila Mandal</b>	:	women's group
<b>Mela</b>	:	fair
<b>Panchayat</b>	:	local governing body
<b>Sarpanch</b>	:	elected head of village

## Endnotes

1. Throughout this report the reader may find distinct boxes reporting excerpts from life history in-depth interviews and FGDs. The illustrations of data collected through each of these methods are not mixed. However for a holistic and rounded understanding, the inferences from the data collected by life histories, FGDs and interviews have together informed our analysis.
2. The selected districts where the study was done were Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh; Mehboobnagar in Telangana; Barpeta and Kamrup in Assam ; Gaya ,Patna ,Bhagalpur and Munger in Bihar; Barwani, Dhar, Balaghat in Madhya Pradesh; East Khasi Hills in Meghalaya; Udaipur in Rajasthan, Hoogly, Murshidabad, Kolkata and 24 South Paraganas in West Bengal.
3. Sex ratio is defined as females per thousand males.
4. Census 2011
5. According to DLHS 2007-08 % of married woman currently aged 20-24 were married before the legal age 18.
6. Special Bulletin on Maternal Mortality in India- 2010-2012 (Office of Registrar General in India)
7. National Health Mission (SRS 2013)
8. Rate of crime against women means number of crimes against women per one lakh population of women
9. Crime in India, 2013, National Crime Records Bureau, Government of India. This data may not be reliable because of extreme variability but may give a context within which community fears about women and girls may be located.
10. Census 2011
11. Marriage below 18 (not motherhood) was the contingent factor for recruitment of the sample. Child marriage and early pregnancy are linked. However this being a qualitative study we prioritized meaning making of the participants by focusing on motherhood and not pregnancy. Talking of motherhood came easy to women informants, so it was strategic to choose this lead for a dialogue with women interviewees. In our sample of 42 women, 35 were found to be mothers of at least one living child.
12. There are injunctions against quantifying focused group data or using focus groups as a quick and easy way of indicating a large sample size. It must be emphasized that it is a qualitative method suited for exploratory, interpretive, multi method and phenomenological research questions (Wilkenson, 2004)
13. ASHA is an acronym for Accredited Social Health Activist who is a community health worker in public health services.
14. The word Anganwadi means courtyard shelter. The Indian Government initiated Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Program in 1975 to combat child hunger and malnutrition. An Anganwadi centre provides basic healthcare in Indian villages. It caters specially to government sponsored child care and mother care. Anganwadi workers are selected from the local community and deliver the ICDS programme as a frontline worker.
15. Nine women researchers and one Trans\* researcher were involved in data collection in the sites selected and researcher's age ranged between 22 – 26 years.
16. The Gazette of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, dated Jan11, 2007 <http://wcd.nic.in/cma2006.pdf>
17. The global average for age of sexual consent is 16. The revision in age of consent is widely being critiqued for its moralistic and unrealistic assumptions.
18. Access <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/nfhs3.shtml>
19. This is interesting as it shows that some people find the minimum age of marriage as defined by law to not be adequate keeping in mind the urban context of education and employment. They appear to argue for these ages to be reviewed and increased.

20. *These terms maybe controversial, they have their roots in structural anthropology, particularly Levi-Strauss's model of marriage and kinship system that offered explanation for cross cousin marriages and sister exchange along rules of exogamy that create social structures because marriages are according to him forged between groups and not just between spouses. Groups exchanging women on a regular basis are said to create a debtor/creditor relationship that must be balanced through the repayment of wives, either immediately or in the next generation (Levi-Strauss, 1969).*
21. *In a survey conducted for India Today by NGO Prayas, 181 cases of broken child marriages of aata saata were found in one village in Bhilwara district. Source:<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/A+child+and+divorced/1/5461.html>*
22. *The wives of this informant could not be interviewed due to their non-availability.*
23. *The male pronoun has been used for the transgendered person as 'she' identified as a trans-man.*
24. *Operating guidelines of Kanyashree Prakalpa, Department of Women Development and Social Welfare, August 2013.*
25. *Numbers in brackets are proportion of sample.*