

What About Us

The Study on Situation of Young Married Girls

DRAFT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early marriage continues to be an entrenched phenomenon in certain parts of India. The objectives of the research presented in this report are to explore the experiences and perceptions of early marriage among young married girls, older married women and young men. In doing so, it sought to understand the contextual factors, such as community beliefs, attitudes and practices, and other intersecting social and economic factors that support early marriage. The findings of this study will enable Vikalp Sansthan to deepen, and give appropriate direction to, its interventions in the study area, which consists of 10 villages in Mavli Block in Udaipur District in Rajasthan State in northern India.

The study followed a purposive sampling approach to select 218 participants among young married girls residing in their marital home. Additionally, 200 older women (mothers-in-law of the married girls) were interviewed, along with 50 young grooms.

Analysis of the research led to findings in nine theme areas:

Caste and poverty

The social exclusion of lower castes and tribes impact the lives of young girls. Because these groups live in the periphery of the rural communities, they experience deprivation and discrimination regarding access to land, livelihoods, education, health services and employment. More than half of the young bride households belonged to disadvantaged Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities and 33 percent belonged to Other Backward Classes. Based on ration card ownership, almost half of the households with young brides lived on income below the poverty line. The average age at marriage was the lowest among girls from the Scheduled Tribe communities.

Common ceremony

To reduce expenditure, many households married more than one daughter in a single ceremony. The study noted a high level of cases in which several girls were married on the same day in a common ceremony. Around 63 percent of the respondents said that they had been married in a common ceremony along with other siblings. The proportion of young brides who married in common ceremonies with their siblings was the largest among the Other Backward Class households. Many respondents cited the rising expense of marriage and several girl children in the family as the two reasons why younger girl children were married early.

Labor contribution in the domestic economy

Young men migrate to nearby areas for work. Hence, the demand for women's labor at home emanates from this socioeconomic reality, wherein they are required for all domestic labor, which includes looking after livestock and working the fields as landless laborers. Early marriage facilitates docile and compliant girls who can be trained for the work and curbs their agency to question the heavy burden of work. The study highlights the burden of work experienced by these young girls.

Family honor and respect

Early marriage of young girls sustains the "honor" and respectability of their family and caste-based community. It takes away the pressure on the natal family to maintain the "sexual purity" of the girls. It also ensures the perpetuation of masculine power and control over women's bodies, sexuality and fertility. Early marriage effectively nips in the bud the capability of young girls to acquire information, become aware and be active agents of control over themselves and their bodies.

Coercion and violence

Coercion and control within the marital home ensures that they perform all assigned work. Expression of autonomy by some girls or women led to the withdrawal of natal family support. Sometimes, violent crimes against women were justified by surviving relatives and/or the community as the outcome of unprecedented autonomy by young women who acted in non-normative ways. An important aspect of the young brides' lives in the study area was their early initiation into a sexual union, leading to early conception, followed by childbirth. Around 40 percent of the young brides in this study did not have a long engagement prior to their marriage, and 36 percent were engaged for one to three years before marriage. Long engagements did not necessarily provide protection for young brides against sexual unions or violence.

Early sexual union and childbirth

Most often, girls were too young and overwhelmed to exercise any choice in decisions about sexual activity, pregnancy and childbirth. What would be considered statutory rape in another context would be normalized under the guise of "marriage". Shame, secrecy and taboo surrounding discussion about menstruation, contraception and sexual health also meant that girls proceeded relatively unprepared to their marital home.

Educational deficit and diminished childhood

A loss of freedom for young girls due to early marriage is evident, with at least half the young women in the study moving into their marital home by age 16. The withdrawal from education was a key concern expressed by the girls; given the opportunity, they would like to go back to school, where they could have access to information, a network of friends and develop greater agency. More than half of the young girls said that they missed going to school and that they missed the games they used to play in school with their friends. But the "fear" of violence and lack of alternate appropriate role models both deterred them from even discussing their aspirations with their marital family.

Masculine agency

Conceptions of masculinity and exercise of agency by young men were quite apparent in the study. The young men expressed typical notions of masculinity that emphasized their anxieties over the breadwinning responsibility for their household. At the same time, they also expressed strong gender discriminatory attitudes toward women in their communities, normalizing violence against women, the privileges of being men and having autonomy to pursue their sexuality through multiple relationships outside of marriage.

Fear and anxieties

Girls and younger women were unable to speak freely in their marital home, where their conversations with the researchers were heavily supervised. They expressed, however, a range of fears and anxieties around marriage, such as an unspecified sense of dread about the new situation, fear of failing to perform household duties, tyranny of the mother-in-law and loss of their father or a brother due to their death. Older women (mothers and mothers-in-law) articulated fears that were linked to the well-being of their daughters, such as the breaking down of a marriage. Such expressions indicated the relational identities of girls and women, linked to the domestic economy and socially approved age-specific roles and their reluctance to articulate individual preference.

Recommendations

The study highlighted the deeply entrenched and enmeshed relationship of caste and tribe and social exclusion based on community identity, gender inequality, gender discrimination and violence against young girls in the villages in Mavli Block. There is a diversity of experience of early marriage among the young girls and boys in different villages that needs to be

contextualized, based on the type of community present, issues of dominance or exclusion and access or lack of access to basic services, like education and health.

All interventions need to focus on empowering young girls who are already married and living in their marital home (*laadis*) and who are the most vulnerable, young girls who are married but living in their natal home and girls who are yet to marry. With young boys, the focus should be toward dismantling notions of masculinity, power and violence and enhancing knowledge and self-reflection for gender-equal practices and behaviors. However, change can only be achieved with sustained and continuous engagement with households, communities and state institutions in a multi-pronged approach: through advocacy, outreach and awareness-related work on prevention of early marriage.

Development organizations such as Vikalp Sansthan need to articulate an empowerment approach for transforming gender relations within these communities with an intersectional approach that considers the interplay of caste, tribe and religion in defining the lives of young women and men and fostering early marriage practices. This would mean leadership building among women and men and interaction and engagement with key stakeholders at the household, community and state levels.

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage as an institution continues to be propagated as the only legitimate way for expressing and experiencing sexuality in India. Intrinsic to the cultural norms followed by most communities and families, the beliefs and values around marriage shape the upbringing of children and the course and content of their gendered lives. Early and child marriage is a particularly glaring instance of how social norms and practice govern the life cycle of millions of girls by imposing control over their sexuality, cutting their aspirations to size and grooming them for a lifetime of subordination.

This report uses the term “early marriage” to include child marriage, forced marriage, marriage at an age younger than the legal age (18 for girls and 21 for boys in India) as well as marriage of older adolescents (including older than 18 for girls) constituting a socio-cultural phenomenon outside the control of the girls and boys involved. Thus, it does not strictly confine itself only to marriages among persons “younger than 18” (given that age is not always evident or relevant in rural scenarios); rather, it considers the wider social phenomenon of child, early and forced marriages.

Early marriage facilitates the maintenance and reproduction of other forms of entrenched inequalities, such as those based on caste and class, as well as rural and urban boundaries. Prevention of transgressions by girls of caste and community boundaries through free-choice marriage, education, occupation or other lifestyles enables conceptions of “caste purity” to retain their powerful effects on society and individuals. Capturing them sufficiently young through the rigorous maintenance of the values of early marriage, often through rewards and punishments, significantly reduces the risk of transgression by girls and women. Escape routes for individual girls and young women in the shape of alternative life choices are seriously compromised when large numbers of girls in their own communities are married off, long before attaining adulthood.

Both a cause as well as a consequence of women’s subordination, early marriage translates into sexual and economic servitude for women by reinforcing masculine power and control over women’s reproductive and productive labor. A problematic outcome of early marriage is the link between gender roles perpetuated by early marriage and gender-based violence. Early marriage provides the opportunity and context for the occurrence and silencing of socially sanctioned gender-based violence. While consensual sexual relations with a minor girl would be considered statutory rape, the same act is rendered unproblematic under the protective institution of marriage (de Silwa-de-Alwis, 2008). Child, early and forced marriages not only constitute violations of the human rights of girls but are also among the most pervasive forms of gender-based violence (UNICEF, 2014). Global data show that the considerable decline in child marriage achieved in recent years is insufficient to meet the Sustainable Development Goal of eliminating this practice by 2030 (UNICEF, 2018).

Early marriage is perceived to be undermining equality and the empowerment of girls and women, reinforcing and perpetuating negative social norms and curtailing opportunities for girls (Asrari, 2015). It is viewed as trapping an estimated 15 million girls annually in a cycle of poverty, ill health and inequality (Zafar, 2015). Early marriage also violates girls’ reproductive rights and right to freedom from sexual violence. Early marriage leads to early and forced sexual relations and life-threatening health consequences from repeated pregnancies and childbirth before a girl is physically and psychologically mature (Zafar, 2015).

Patriarchal norms of diverse communities from different regions, castes, classes, tribes and ethnicities continue to perpetuate control over women’s labor, both reproductive and productive. This control over women’s labor forms a continuum from the private to the public. Households in marginalized and poor communities view their girls as an economic burden, as a commodity, a means for settling communal debts or disputes, or for making social, economic and political alliances. Early marriage has been linked to early childbirth and high maternal mortality.

Malnourishment among adolescent girls is routine, and their access to health care services are poor. Children born to young mothers are vulnerable to mortality and morbidity.

In turn, poverty is perpetuated intergenerationally because the control over female labor is ensured through child marriage, reproduction and maternity, all of which are manifestations of violence against girls and women. Marriage at a young age and withheld education limits girls' opportunities to exercise their agency and their access to information linked to their body, sexuality and reproductive health. This, in turn, makes them vulnerable to forced sex, repeated and early pregnancies, miscarriages and physical and verbal violence. Trapped in a situation in which there is no access to property, finance and other resources, girls and women face the threat of abandonment, desertion and become vulnerable to practices like *nata*, or second, informal marriage.

Among all the women alive today, more than 700 million of them were married before their eighteenth birthday, and 250 million of them entered a sexual union before the age of 15. And 33 percent (47 percent according to some sources) of all child brides in the world live in India (UNICEF, 2014). These numbers highlight the existence of a massive, unaddressed problem. Child marriage infringes on the rights of women and children spelled out in international agreements, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

While the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) in India criminalizes the practice, the State remains ambivalent toward acting upon its limited provisions. Failing to protect girls from physical and psychological abuse within a child marriage context means that a large number of children and adolescents are routinely exposed to violence.

This research, undertaken by Vikalp Sansthan in partnership with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences-Mumbai, explored the experiences of "young brides" and "young grooms" within the phenomenon of early marriage in southern Udaipur District. Vikalp Sansthan has been working to establish connections and create interventions for this highly vulnerable group of girls and young women, whose mobility and conduct are strictly controlled by their husband's family. Their intervention work has generally targeted engaged or married girls still living in their natal home. The evidence presented in this report is therefore a unique contribution to the understanding of implications of early marriage for the lives of young women and men.

This report presents the evidence from fieldwork conducted in 10 villages of Mavli Block in Udaipur District of Rajasthan State in northern India, during which 218 girls who had married before the age of 18 (young brides) lived in their marital home, 200 older women (mothers-in-law of young brides) and 50 young men (grooms) were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. The point was to understand the difficulties in accessing a group of girls who are married and have moved to live in their marital home.

The report begins with a literature review that summarizes the legal context of early marriage and the existing evidence base in India. This is followed by the detailed objectives and methodology used in the study. Next, background detail of the communities in the 10 villages in the study area is provided, within which the early marriage phenomena unfold. This is followed by a socioeconomic profile of the 218 households where the young brides were living. The broad findings and analysis of the study are presented in two main sections; the first focuses on the experiences of the young brides, and the second provides details and insights from the interviews conducted with young men who had married before the age of 18. The evidence and analysis from the three sections are collated to provide concluding discussion and recommendations for future action.

Literature review

There have been several studies on child, early and forced marriages in India, but only a few significant ones were reviewed for this report. In a recent study, researchers analyzed the strategies used by 10 organizations across India to address child marriage. They then recommended an urgent increase in life options of young girls through education, employment, working with gatekeepers who influence family decisions (like fathers, brothers, community leaders and older women), promoting marriage and birth registrations and addressing the needs of adolescent brides (Dasra, 2014).

Another study by ActionAid found that seven states (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Bihar) accounted for 70 percent of child marriages in India. The ActionAid study reiterated that certain socioeconomic conditions and regional variations have a considerable role in perpetuating child marriage, and this poverty was not a lone factor (Goli, 2016). The study highlighted that denial of education and employment to girls and women leads to child marriage and there is need to explore context-specific religious and cultural factors among communities. Even though boys are also affected by early marriage, the disadvantage is clearly skewed against girls. Hence, the ActionAid researchers recommended further research on culture, gender and inequality (Goli, 2016).

In a study by Nirantar Trust on early and child marriages, primary data collected from 19 organizations working on child marriage revealed several root causes, such as the economics of marriage, sexuality, gender norms and masculinity, educational and institutional gaps, the centrality of marriage, risk, vulnerability and uncertainty, and age as an axis of power. Using a feminist perspective of sexuality and power when looking at early and child marriages, the Nirantar study described the phenomena as linked to control over women's labor. The researchers suggested that institutional structures of gendered and intersectional oppression and inequalities and their perpetuation through early marriage need to be explored further (Nirantar, 2015).

Identifying structural and institutional approaches that aim to reduce barriers to formal education and employment for girls and empowering programs for girls and boys to exercise their agency to challenge unequal gender norms and develop skills to negotiate and address gendered ideas of marriage and sexuality are some critical issues that need examination in specific contexts. These can then inform strategic interventions to bring change in cultures of gendered oppression and enhance the systemic delivery of basic services, including education, health and livelihoods for girls and women.

Child marriage infringes on the rights of women and children that are spelled out in international agreements, such as CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Under international law, the term "child marriage" is used to describe a legal or customary union between two people when one or both parties are younger than 18 years. CEDAW prohibits child marriage (Article 16), declares betrothal and marriage of children as illegal, requires all governments to specify a minimum age of marriage and makes official registration of all marriages compulsory (UNGA, 1979). However, India has extended reservations to Article 16 of the CEDAW, citing non-interference in community practices of a personal nature (Freeman, 2009: 41).

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in India defines "child" as a person who, if male, has not completed 21 years of age and, if female, has not completed 18 years of age. The 2006 law increased the punishment for promoting or performing a child marriage from three months or a fine to up to two years in jail and a fine of up to 200,000 rupees. A recent judgment by the Supreme Court recognized the violence inherent in child marriage by describing a sexual union with a wife younger than 18 years as rape. But the law has yet to be effective in preventing the early marriage of girls, as the latest available census data indicate, with nearly 103 million women married before they were 18 as of 2011 (Chowdhury, 2016). Despite this, only 948 cases were

filed countrywide against persons promoting or performing child marriages, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau for 2001–2011. And only 157 individuals were convicted (Shaikh, 2015). From 2012 to 2016, NCRB data show 997 cases of child marriage filed under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (Dasgupta, 2018). Enforcement of the law and conviction for child marriage is weak. For instance, in 2016, a trial was completed for only 68 cases, of which, 10 were convicted and 58 were acquitted without charge (NCRB, 2016: 201)

Clearly, all legal measures to prevent early marriage fall short due to lack of adequate enforcement as well as their inability to address the structural causes of early marriage, which are deeply embedded in the patriarchal gender relations within the institutions of households, communities and the State.

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Rationale for the study in Rajasthan—Vikalp Sansthan’s approach and initiative

An initial study by Vikalp Sansthan revealed that a majority of young married women and girls in the state of Rajasthan are members of the most historically disadvantaged castes and tribes (including the Bhil, Meghwal and Banjara). The young brides living in marital homes wanted to speak up about their lives but fear of repercussions as well as repeated episodes of various forms of violence prevented them from doing so. There was a huge degree of control and surveillance on their mobility within and outside the home, and they were overwhelmed by childbearing and household work.

Because that was an exploratory study, Vikalp needed to deepen its understanding of situations in its intervention areas, specifically to locate the prevalence of violence (physical, sexual, emotional), the strategies for coping with violence and the support systems that young brides know about and can access, as well as the services and support they want but do not have. They wanted to compare the experiences of young brides and the similarities and differences in their lives with that of girls who had not been married and with earlier generations of women who had been married early. Vikalp also believes in working with boys to address their ideas and behaviors regarding violence and masculinity; hence, it wanted to include boys’ experiences of early marriage in further research.

Vikalp’s experiences revealed that for interventions to be practical and in-depth, there is a need to understand the contexts of the communities it seeks to work in. Thus, Vikalp partnered with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in an action research project from 2016 through 2018. The findings presented here are expected to help Vikalp better understand child, early and forced marriages and related violence in the lives of young brides and design evidence-based interventions to empower and support them.

Methodology

To conceptualize the research and develop the methodology for the research, two leading activists in Vikalp Sansthan, Yogesh and Usha, had in-depth conversations with the Tata Institute researchers to understand their personal motivation and commitment to working on early marriage issues in Rajasthan. Usha was almost married to a stranger 10 years older when she was 14; determined to continue her education and the path of her own life, Usha’s successful fight to stop her marriage inspired a lifetime of work to prevent child marriages and empower other girls in Rajasthan and beyond to stand up for their rights. Yogesh’s interest to engage with boys and enable them to understand issues of masculinity and early marriage and how it impacts their lives comes from 20 years of working in rural areas of Rajasthan.

The research was divided into three phases. The first part comprised exploratory work by Vikalp Sansthan in the targeted areas and initial discussion and training of the research team on participatory research techniques. Community profiles were developed based on the inputs of the 10 targeted villages. The second part of the research comprised a detailed baseline survey with semi-structured interviews in the 10 villages. In-depth interviews were carried out with the targeted populations. In the third phase, analysis was carried out by the research team collaboratively with the Tata Institute and Vikalp Sansthan.

The research set four objectives:

- explore the experiences and perceptions of early marriage among young married girls;
- understand how older married women (mothers-in-law of young brides) viewed early marriage;
- explore young men’s (grooms) experiences and perspectives about marriage; and
- understand the contextual factors, such as community beliefs, attitudes and practices, and other intersecting social and economic factors that supported early marriage.

Research participants and method

The primary research subjects were 218 married girls and young women in two age categories: (i) those who were younger than 18 years at the time of the study and (ii) those who were 19–24 years old at the time of the study but were married before the age of 18. In addition, 200 older women (primarily mothers-in-law) who had been child brides were also interviewed in the same households to understand both the role of older women in shaping the experiences of early marriage of the young brides and the changing nature of early marriage.

The 10 villages (Bhumlavas, Changedi, Girdharipura, Khartana, Mankhand, Morath, Ognakheda, Shivpura, Vasni Kalan and Vasni Khurd) are located in the Mavli Block of Udaipur District in Rajasthan State. This area constitutes Vikalp Sansthan's core intervention area. The study followed a purposive sampling approach to select participants from households with young brides who had moved to reside in their marital home. The young brides were mainly contacted through networks of family, caste and kin, based on information provided by Vikalp field staff. In a few cases, the young brides had not moved to the marital home and were interviewed while they lived in the natal home.

A purposively selected sample of 50 young men from the same area were also interviewed using a structured questionnaire to understand the role and experience of young men in the phenomenon of early marriage.

Beyond individual choice and family compulsion, the practice of early and forced marriages is largely determined by the values and norms prevalent in the wider social networks. To understand community attitudes and beliefs, unstructured conversations were conducted with members of each primary respondent's family. Other important people at the community level—the gatekeepers who influence the family's decision about marrying girls off, such as four caste panchayat leaders, two elected government representatives, five government health workers and two police officers were also interviewed using interview checklists. All the interviews were conducted from October through December 2016.

SECTION I LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

MAVLI BLOCK, UDAIPUR DISTRICT

According to the latest census findings, Mavli Block had a population of 253,344 persons in 2011; of them, 12.6 percent lived in urban areas and 87.4 percent lived in the rural areas. Hindus made up 95.6 percent, Muslims 2.4 percent and Jains 1.8 percent of the total Mavli population. Of the Hindu population, 10.7 percent belonged to the Scheduled Castes and 20.5 percent were Scheduled Tribes. The sex ratio was 966, which was much higher than the state average of 883. However, the child sex ratio was 901, which is a matter of concern and points toward a distinct higher mortality and neglect of girls. The average literacy rate in urban areas was 77.8 percent while in the rural areas it was 59.6 percent. There was considerable disparity in literacy rates among men and women in Mavli Block, with male literacy at 65.2 per cent and female literacy at 40.2 percent. This, again, was much lower than the state literacy rates, with female literacy at 52.7 percent and male literacy at 80.5 percent. Mavli Block is predominantly rural, and most of the people rely on agriculture for their occupation, with a large number of persons working as cultivators and agricultural laborers. A small portion of residents work in household industries and other occupations (UNDP, 2011).

According to the census findings, Udaipur District had a population of slightly more than 3 million persons in 2011, with a population density of 242 inhabitants per square kilometer. Despite efforts in the past few decades to stabilize the population growth, the district's population has grown at a faster rate (at 23.6 percent) than the state's population (at 21.4 percent). However, the growth rate in the district had declined since 2001. The census data showed that the sex ratio had declined from 969 in 2001 to 958 in 2011. The literacy rate for men and women had increased since 2001, but there was a noticeable disparity, with the female rate at 48.5 percent while the male rate was 74.7 percent. Around 39 percent of population was in the lowest 20 percent wealth index, compared with 18.1 percent in the highest category. In terms of health outcomes, the total fertility rate for the district was 4 children per 1,000 women, which was almost double the desired level of 2.1; and the infant mortality rate was 62 per 1,000 live births, which was 60 at the state level (MHA, 2012).

Early marriage in Udaipur District

Based on findings from the Annual Health Survey 2012–2013, an estimated 20.5 percent of married girls in rural Udaipur District were younger than the legal age of marriage. Currently married women who were married before attaining legal age was 42.7 per cent in rural Udaipur and 27.2 per cent in urban part of the district. Significantly, marriage among males, younger than the legal age of 21, was even higher than for females, at 41.2 per cent in rural Udaipur (MHA, 2013: 11).

Evidence on the decline in early marriage among girls in Rajasthan State derives from the National Family Health Survey 2015–2016 (NFHS-4): The percentage of women who were married before their eighteenth birthday came down by half over the past 10 years. The 65 percent of the women in the NFHS-3 who had married before they were 18 years reduced to 35.4 percent in the NFHS-4 findings. The percentage of men who had married before they were 21—the minimum legal age of marriage for men—also came down, to 35.7 percent from 57 percent in the NFHS-3 (Goswami, 2016).

This decline is not enough. A more worrying trend is that 6 percent of women aged 15–19 in the state had already given birth or were pregnant at the time of the survey (2015–2016). This proportion was 16 percent in 2005–2006 (Goswami, 2016). The NFHS-4 also highlights other disturbing issues in Rajasthan State related to women's empowerment and gender-based violence. Only 19 percent of rural women had participated in economic activities remunerated with cash wages in the reference period, less than a quarter of them owned their house or land,

and more than a quarter of them reported experiencing spousal violence. Low levels of educational attainment, negligible participation in paid economic activities and a young age at marriage point to high levels of gender-based inequality and poor and oppressive quality of life for girls and young women, which is further reinforced and perpetuated by early marriage.

Profile of the study villages

As shown in the following table, there was great disparity in literacy rates among men and women in all the survey sample villages. It is worrying to see that six of the 10 villages (Bhumlavas, Girdharipura, Khartana, Mankhand, Morath and Vasni Khurd) had an adverse child sex ratio, indicating some form of gender-based discrimination, such as relative neglect of girls.

The following village profiles provide an overview of the economy and social structure that affect the circumstances of early marriage and the lives of the young brides and their households. Women from all caste groups in all the villages follow the custom of veiling (*ghunghat*). Rajput women practice more elaborate veiling than the other castes.

Profile of population in the study villages from census 2011

Village	Population by sex		Scheduled Castes population		Scheduled Tribes population		Population by sex (0–6 years)	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Bhumlavas	496	447	0	0	314	335	68	78
Changedi	1 602	1 586	401	421	141	136	259	202
Girdharipura	360	375	20	22	1	1	52	60
Khartana	1 374	1 395	265	246	142	138	183	194
Mankhand	585	622	28	28	201	237	80	107
Morath	595	572	59	57	165	148	71	79
Ognakheda*	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Shivpura	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Vasni Kalan	742	725	124	110	151	153	123	113
Vasni Khurd	839	899	69	78	11	18	131	152

Note: *=A ward of Fatehnagar Municipality. NA=not available.

Source: Collated from village data of Census of India 2011, Government of India.

Bhumlavas is smaller than the other villages, with a total of 181 families. The average sex ratio was 901 in the 2011 census findings, which was lower than the Rajasthan State average of 928. The child sex ratio was 872, lower than the Rajasthan average of 888. Male literacy was nearly 67 percent and female literacy was nearly 38 percent. Most of the village population is from the Scheduled Tribes, at nearly 69 percent. There is no population of Scheduled Castes. Around 60 percent of workers described their work in the census as main work (employed or earning income for more than six months), while nearly 40 percent were involved in marginal activity providing livelihood for fewer than six months.

Changedi is a large village located in Mavli Tehsil municipality, with a total of 727 families. The population of children aged up to 6 years is 461, which represents nearly 15 percent of the total village population. According to the census data, the average sex ratio was 1,010 in 2011, which was higher than Rajasthan State average of 928. The child sex ratio was 1,282, higher than the Rajasthan average of 888. However, the literacy rate is lower than the rate for the state. The 2011 census found a substantial population of Scheduled Castes living in the village, constituting nearly 26 percent of the population, while Scheduled Tribes were 8.7 percent. Nearly 77 percent of workers described their work for the census as main work (employed or earning for more than six months), while 23 percent were involved in marginal activity providing livelihood for fewer

than six months. Of the 1,704 workers engaged in main work, 714 were cultivators (owner or co-owner), while 121 were in agriculture.

Girdharipura is a small village in the administrative area of Morath, well connected by road transport to Fatehnagar (3 km) and by rail to the district capital. Proximity to Fatehnagar has created non-farm work opportunities for residents. As is typical tradition, many men have moved into the village to live with their wife's family to avail of the income opportunities, giving Girdharipura the epithet of "bridegrooms' village (*jamaiyon ka gaon*). Men, women and older children work in the nearby marble factories and grain mills. The village has a government middle school, one child care center (*anganwadi*) and a community hall, and most households, irrespective of their caste, own some agricultural land. The numerically dominant caste is the Banjara (an upwardly mobile middle caste), with some households of Gadri, Salvi, Rajput, Gameti and Jat. Most households are located around the main road; caste-specific sections of the village are not apparent. However, during a village feast, this study's interviewers observed children sitting in caste-specific rows as they were served food in school as part of a government program. The village has three temples, seven shops, two water tanks, 12 drinking water handpumps and a shrine dedicated to *bavji*.

Khartana village is situated in Mavli Tehsil municipality and comprises 574 families. The average sex ratio was 985 in 2011 census findings, which was higher than the Rajasthan State average of 928. The child sex ratio was 943, which was higher than the Rajasthan average of 888. Also according to the census findings, the literacy rate was nearly 55 percent (lower than the state average of 66 percent), with male literacy at nearly 70 percent, while the female literacy rate was nearly 40 percent. Scheduled Castes constitute slightly more than 18 percent of the population, while Scheduled Tribes are 10 percent. Nearly 57 percent of workers described their work for the census as main work (employed or earning income for more than six months), while almost 44 percent were involved in marginal activity providing livelihood for fewer than six months. The work profile points to a large population that does not have regular employment. This combined with the low literacy rate among the women provides a conducive environment for promoting early marriage of children within the village.

Mankhand is a medium-sized village with a population of 1,206 persons. A stark disparity was noticed in this village between the Rajput locality and the segregated (almost hidden) area where the Bhil houses are located. Also, the homes in the Rajput area are bigger and seemingly well built, while the Bhil houses are dilapidated and in poorer condition. Rajputs are the dominant caste grouping in the village and are referred to as "chiefs" (*sardars*) by the "subordinate" castes in the village.

Morath is a large *gram panchayat* village situated 7 km from Fatehnagar Municipality. Unlike some of the other sample villages, Morath lacks a good road and transport connection to the nearby urban centers. Livelihoods significantly depend on agriculture and cattle rearing. Wheat, pearl millet, maize, mustard, various pulses and groundnuts are raised in the summer-monsoon and winter seasons. Parts of the village appear prosperous, with seemingly well-constructed houses, concrete roads with privately owned transport (cars and two wheelers). The interior and outer sections appear poorer. The numerically dominant caste are Bhils (Scheduled Tribe) and Meghwals (Scheduled Caste). Most of the child marriage cases were found in the poorer sections of the village, where few girls are educated.

Ognakheda village is located within the municipality of Fatehnagar, in ward No. 10 of Nagar Palika Sanwad. According to the 2011 census, the population of Ognakheda was 1,199 and most of them belonged to the Bhil community. Other caste groups, such as Rajput, Kumawat and Rawats, also live here. The settlement has an upper-primary school with classes up to Class 8 but no primary health center. The *anganwadi* is in poor condition and operates out of a one-room structure. The upper-caste Rajput settlements are located at a distance from the Bhil areas, with

the former connected by paved roads and the latter reachable by walking paths. There are three temples, one of the Hindu deity Shiva and the other two dedicated to male (*bavji*) and female (*mataji*) ancestral spirits. These temples are venues of seasonal festivities. Women often attribute many of their ailments or other misfortunes to the actions of the *bavji* or *mataji*. Water supply in the village is adequate, with two water tanks, wells, handpumps and taps. Rajputs own the grocery shops where residents purchase their daily needs.

Shivpura is a small village about 8 km from Mavli town, the Mavli Tehsil headquarters. Services there include a three-classroom primary school, an *anganwadi* centre and a small grocery shop. There is no road leading into the village and no street lighting along the paths at night. The residents are dependent upon hand-operated pumps for drinking water, and many suffer from poor health and nutrition. Education rates are low. The population consists mostly of people in the Bhil (whose houses are scattered throughout the village) and Rajput castes. There is little agricultural work available, so most of the Bhil community members engage in day-labourer work, or some of them migrate to other areas to find employment.

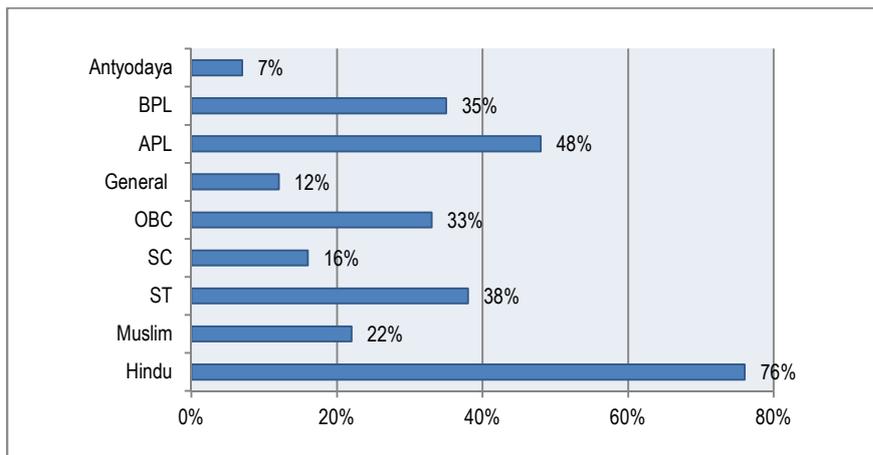
Vasni Kalan is a large *gram panchayat* village serving four other villages and well connected by a concrete access road to the National Highway; it is 5 km from Fatehnagar Municipality and 7 km to the nearest railway station. The community consists of 11 caste groups (Bhil, Meghwal, Rajput, Kumawat, Gadri, Charan, Paliwal, Gujar, Vaishnav, Lohar and Harijan). The Rajputs are the dominant caste group, while the Bhil community are largest in number. The village is divided into caste-designated spaces. Social interaction among caste groups is restricted because inter-caste marriages are not allowed. Upper-caste members tend not to dine in public spaces with other caste members. The cluster of large fort-like Rajput houses are prominently located, followed by households of middle castes (Other Backward Classes), while the lower-status castes live at the far ends of the village. There is electricity, but the streets are in poor condition due to the lack of sanitation and waste disposal services. Several government-run institutions, such as the high school, post office, ration shop and *panchayat* office, are located in the village. Of the two government schools, one is a middle school for girls and the other is a co-ed high school. The nearest government health center is in Fatehnagar. There are five Hindu temples dedicated to different deities and one shrine for *bavji*, the ancestral founding spirit (as in most of the study villages).

Vasni Khurd is a medium-sized village with 383 households, according to the 2011 census data. The majority of the households belong to the Muslim community, while a smaller number of households belong to the Gujar, Jat, Gameti (Bhil) and Meghwal castes. The village is divided into three hamlets; there are two primary schools and one upper-primary school. In addition, there is a madrasa where Muslim children receive their education. All roads are paved, water and sanitation facilities are adequate, and most houses appear to be well constructed and in good condition. The village has an *anganwadi* but no primary health center or other health service. Most villagers travel to Sanwad or Fatehnagar for medical services. The main livelihoods reported are agriculture and animal husbandry. Many households raise horses that they rent out for marriage processions.

Profile of the marital households of the young brides (living there)

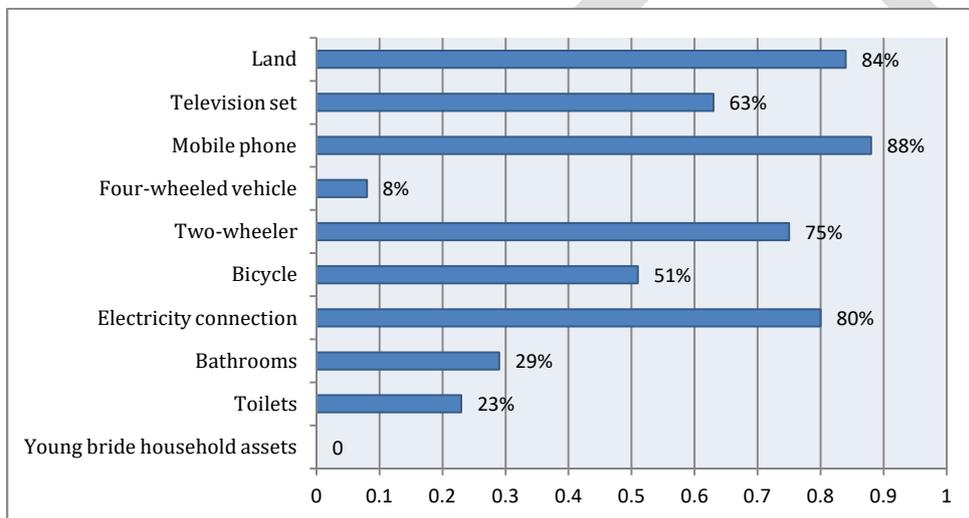
Early marriage was prevalent among all religious communities and caste groups in the study area. Most (76 percent) of the young bride households were Hindu, 22 percent were Muslim and the remaining 2 percent did not specify their religion. More than half of the young bride households belonged to the disadvantaged Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities, while 33 percent belonged to Other Backward Classes. Based on ration card ownership, almost half the households can be described as highly impoverished. Average family size was higher than the NFHS-3 average for the state, at 5.5 persons and relatively higher in the Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities (figure 1).

Figure 1 Social categories of young bride households (n=218)



Note: BPL=below the poverty line; APL= above the poverty line; OBC=Other Backward Classes; SC=Scheduled Castes; ST=Scheduled Tribes.

Figure 2 Young bride household assets (n=218)

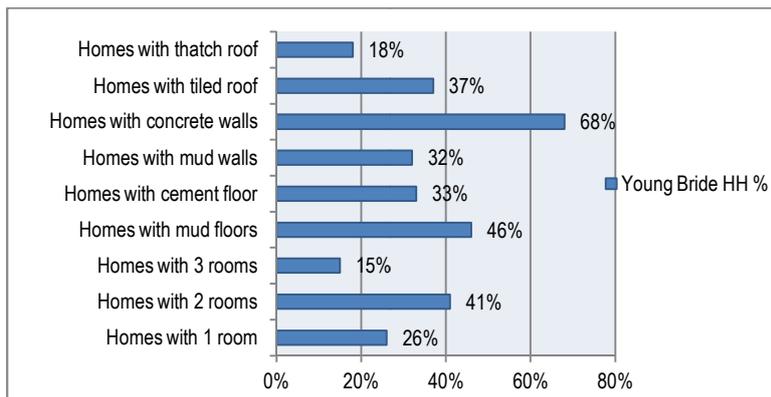


In terms of basic amenities and assets, a majority of the households owned some agricultural land and had electricity connection, two-wheelers, television sets and mobile phones. Most did not have access to safe sanitation facilities (figure 2). Average land ownership per household was highest among the general and Other Backward Class households, at 5.5 *bigha*,¹ lowest among the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe families, at 2.8 *bigha* and 3.1 *bigha*, respectively. Younger women were avid television viewers in most households; during the study interviews, they often quoted characters from television soap opera programs to articulate their ideas and aspirations.

The condition of housing was assessed as a variable of the household economic status. As well, the interviewers inquired about the extent of space available to young brides and grooms in the marital household, which tended to be multigenerational. During the interviews, young brides were rarely left alone or unsupervised. A majority of the households lived in one- or two-roomed structures. This proportion was as high as 72 percent in Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households (figure 3).

¹ Area of land used in Rajasthan, corresponding to 1/3 to 1 acre.

Figure 3 Condition of housing (n= 218)



However, 75 percent of the households reported having an exclusive room for the young married couple, while 19 percent did not have such a space. The interviewers' observations indicated that, in many cases, this exclusive space was not available. In most villages, there was a visible difference in the quality of houses of the upper-caste Rajput and the Scheduled Tribe households, especially among the Bhil community (see the following images).



A Rajput house



A Bhil house devastated due to the rains

SECTION II FINDINGS BASED ON YOUNG BRIDES' AND OLDER WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

Previous studies on women's agency in the context of North Indian society have noted the absence of control among young women on most aspects of their life and how they were viewed as a drain on the resources of their family, no matter how much the parents loved them. Control over women's sexuality is a key aspect of this phenomenon and is perpetuated by such practices as arranged marriage to a stranger and norms of veiling and avoidance, having to share residence with the parents-in-law at great distance from their natal home, being less involved in wage labor outside the home and having non-existent property rights (Jefferey and Jefferey, 1997: 119).

The experiences of young brides in this study closely follow the North Indian pattern and highlight the absence of control that girls and young women face during their sudden and forced transition from school-going childhood to married homemakers and caregivers.

The interviews with the young brides took place mostly in their marital home, where they were never left unsupervised. **The presence of older family members (usually the mother-in-law) influenced the kind of conversation that the girls could have with the interviewers, who were also young women but from a different milieu. Indeed, the older women often chided the interviewers for their choice of questions, sometimes asking them, "Aren't you ashamed of asking your mothers and grandmothers such questions?"** The young brides, greatly aware of the notion of conduct and shame, not surprising, were reticent with their responses and especially refused to answer questions related to sexual relations, physical violence and contraception.

Renuka's story

Renuka was 17 years old at the time of the interview. **She had been married along with her four sisters in a common ceremony when she was 14.** She was quick to veil herself when her husband entered the room where the conversation was taking place. Renuka had failed two subjects in her matriculation exam. **Failure in school often expedited the move to marriage.** After moving to her marital home in Ognakheda village, Renuka's life changed. She had to wear a sari, though she could not drape it herself. She said she could no longer ride her bicycle, explaining, "They would not allow it here." When asked whether her husband was nice to her, she described him as angry sometimes. Her mother-in-law, a stern taskmaster, wanted her to be doing something all the time. Renuka said she was not keen to have children but was aware that she did not have much control over this decision. Renuka said that her father's dream had been for her to "become someone". Yet, he was the one who arranged her marriage. He had told his daughters the common ceremony was the only way he could afford marrying all four of them. Renuka could not go against him, and no one would have listened to her.

Despite a sense of inevitability of getting married, most young brides experienced their marriage as the loss of freedom. Although, they were not all equally able to articulate what freedom would have meant for them.

Most of the interviewed young brides, like Renuka, highlighted **the inability to complete school education because of their transition to the marital home** and the beginning of cohabitation and childbirth. Women attributed much of the decision-making about their marriage to their parents, but **they seldom blamed the parents** for their unhappiness about their marital status and life. Expression of autonomy by the women would lead to the withdrawal of parental support. Sometimes violent crimes against women were "justified" by surviving relatives and/or the community as an outcome of unprecedented autonomy by a young woman who acted in a non-normative way. Most of the respondents were highly preoccupied with the ideas of status and respect, and their narratives were thoughtful and measured. In many cases, others from the community added dimensions to the young brides' personal story. The deep nature of control

and coercion of households and community through early marriage was evident in the narratives of the young brides.

Early vulnerability: Age at marriage, early sexual activity and control of sexuality

Most of the young brides in the study had married before the age of 16. A smaller percentage of them had married before the age of 10 (figure 4). Marriage here refers not just to the formal engagement that would take place at a younger age but also movement to the marital home to fulfil the conjugal responsibility. Of great concern, nearly half of the respondents (among all caste groups) reported beginning puberty after their marriage. The largest proportion of early married girls and those who attained puberty after marriage belonged to the Scheduled Tribe (Bhil) communities (figures 5 and 6). Based on the average reported age of puberty in the study sample (and its proximity to time of marriage), half the respondents were married by the age of 14.

Figure 4 Young brides' age at marriage (n=218)

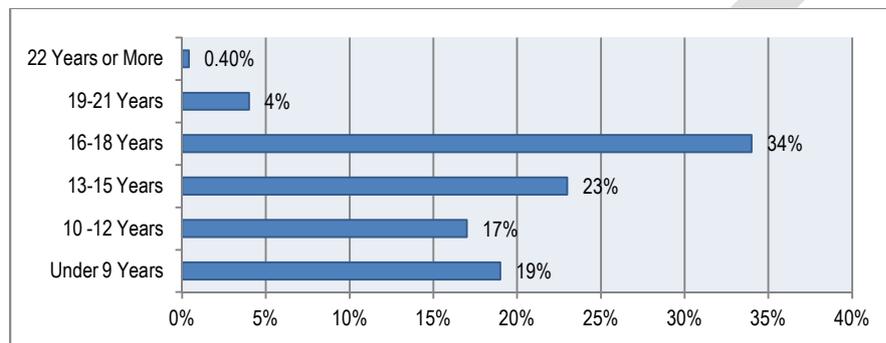
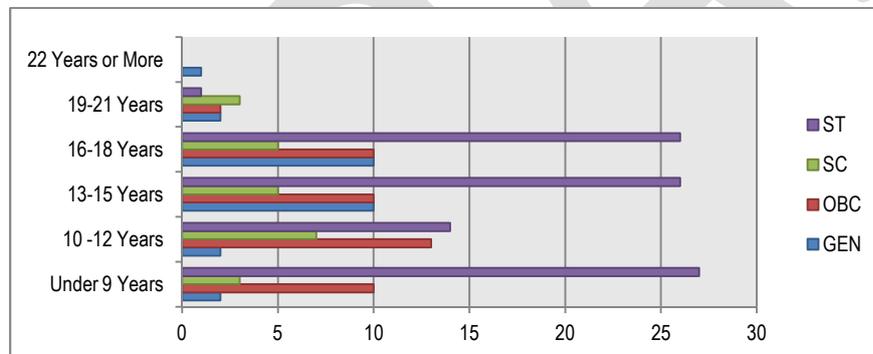
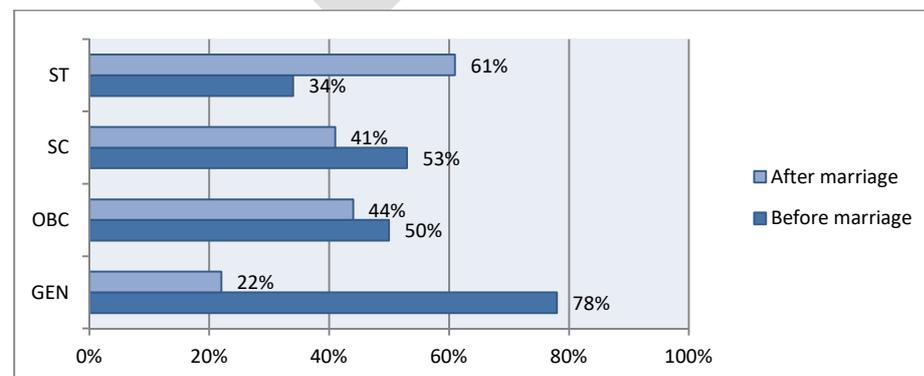


Figure 5 Young brides, by social category (n=218)



Note: ST=Scheduled Tribes; SC=Scheduled Castes; OBC=Other Backward Classes; GEN=general population.

Figure 6 Starting puberty, by caste (n=218)

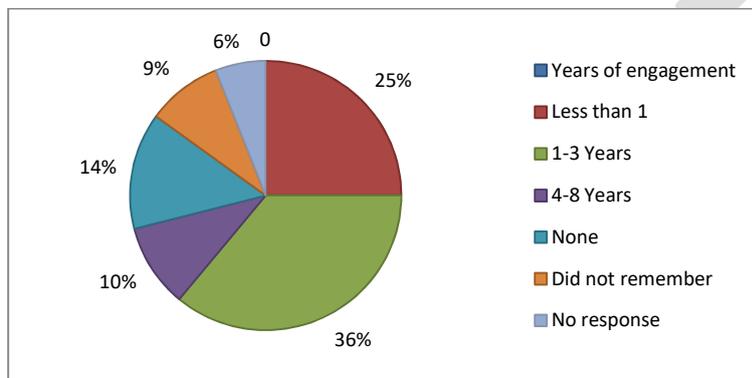


Note: ST=Scheduled Tribes; SC=Scheduled Castes; OBC=Other Backward Classes; GEN=general population.

The marriages in the study area were **pre-dated by long engagements**. Young girls can continue to reside in their less-restricted natal home and avoid conjugal responsibility till they are deemed ready to move to their marital home, usually following a **custom called *gauna***. This provides a buffer period for young girls, although their future is determined. More than 50 percent of the respondents in this study did not start cohabiting with their husband immediately after marriage. Nearly 40 percent of them, however, moved to the husband's house immediately after marriage.

While age of marriage of young girls was perceived to have increased in the study area, the reduced or negligible period of engagement means that the girls may marry later but move sooner to the marital home. Some 40 percent of the young brides did not have a long engagement prior to their marriage, while 36 percent were engaged for one to three years (figure 7). Long engagements did not necessarily provide protection for young brides against sexual activity or violence.

Figure 7 Period of engagement (n=218)



Note: ST=Scheduled Tribes; SC=Scheduled Castes; OBC=Other Backward Classes; GEN=general.

One of the reasons why there continues to be very young brides in the study area, despite a rise in the average age of marriage, is the persistence of “mass marriage”, in which several girls are married on the same day in a common ceremony.

Around 63 percent of the respondents said that they had been married in a common ceremony along with the siblings. The proportion of young brides who were married in a common ceremony with their siblings was largest among the Other Backward Classes (at 73 percent). Many respondents cited the rising expense of marriage and several girls in the family as the two reasons why girls are married at an especially young age.

Deepika's story

Seventeen-year-old Deepika from Girdharipura was pregnant when she spoke to the interviewers, although she had not started cohabiting with her husband or moved to her marital home. She had been married in a formal ceremony at the age of 15 soon after dropping out of school. The couple had permission to visit each other during festivals, which led to sexual activity and an early pregnancy. Deepika expressed fear about losing her freedom, though she was unable to specify what this meant for her. She also articulated unhappiness about being married and leaving school, but she was careful not to blame her parents for ending her education. The inevitability of early marriage is linked to many adolescents' engagement during childhood. Deepika's future in-laws chose her as their son's bride when she was 3 years old.

Thus, birth order may be a great risk for early marriage for later-born girls with older female siblings. Having several older sisters seems to increase the risk of a younger-than-average age of marriage for some girls due to a perceived need to economize through a single ceremony.

Based on the interviews for this study, it seems that young and compliant girls are deemed easier to control and shape by the marital household. Natal households seem relieved that they no longer have responsibility for the care and protection of the “sexual purity” of their young daughters. The marriage of a young girl sustains the honor and respectability of her family and caste-based community. It also ensures the perpetuation of masculine power and control over women’s bodies, sexuality and fertility because it effectively nips in the bud the capability of young girls to acquire information, become aware and be active agents in the control over themselves and their bodies.

The study found that at least half of the young brides had moved into their marital home by the time they were 16 years old. Most respondents were wary about answering the age question, being aware of the legal age of marriage. Of particular concern is that the age at marriage was the youngest among girls from the Scheduled Tribe communities.

The urgency among families to move young brides from their natal to the marital home indicates that girls continue to be perceived as a “burden” among all social categories. Marriage is thus meant to ensure that the sexuality of girls is contained and controlled and to maintain and perpetuate caste endogamy by reducing the risk of elopement, sexual activity and free-choice marriage among young women and men.

Caste, gender and the education of young brides

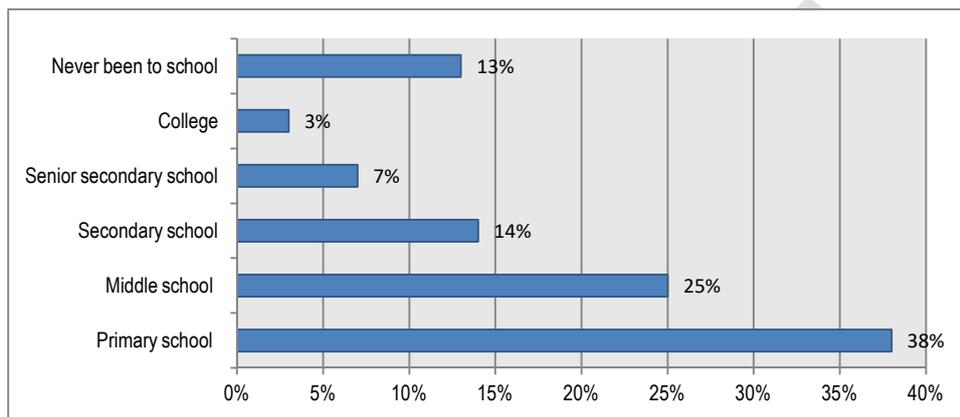
Numerous studies have documented the close relationship between early marriage and the end of formal education for girls. Puberty followed by marriage leads to a high drop-out rate of girls from school, shaping their life course toward unpaid care work and domestic servitude. In societies with high levels of early marriage, girls are also socialized toward a strict sexual division of labor along rigidly defined gendered roles. Here, girls are raised to aspire for marriage and household duties (including working on a family farm) and actively discouraged from performing public and professional roles. In societies in which some level of education is considered indispensable, parents, caste and community members often decide what would be the maximum level of education suitable for girls in their group.

Often, marriageability is tied to a “suitable level” of education for girls and boys. Higher levels of education in such cases are viewed as providing opportunities for girls (and boys) to exercise their choice and agency in many spheres that may go against the prescriptions of caste, kinship and community. Ideas about appropriate levels of education voiced by some young women in the study villages indicate that such standards were applicable for both men and women. A group of women, all younger than 25, said that if they had a choice, they would never marry a man who had gone to college because, essentially, “his mind won’t be focused on the household but will wander outside it”. They also said that the ideal level of education for men was Class 8 and for women it was Class 5. “After that, they should learn domestic duties and get engaged to marry,” explained one of the young women.

The interviewers were also told by several respondents (older and younger women and young boys) that the reason girls dropped out of school was due to the lack of their own mental capacity. Often-heard comments: “she is just a girl”, “does not have brains enough” and “cannot concentrate, so could not stay in school and so was married off”. The other reason that was offered was the question of safety. Many young women in Vasni Kalan village, for instance, were unable to continue after Class 8 because it was the highest level at the village school. Higher class levels meant travelling to Mavli town. Not many of the girls from the village did that, so it would not be safe for a few to travel. Older women had studied even less. They told the interviewers that, for them, school was for playing or grazing animals (small ruminants, like goats, taken for grazing in the school playground); some had left school because the teacher scolded them or hit them for not doing homework.

Most of the young brides expressed regret at leaving school – thus contradicting the commonly voiced notions against their formal schooling, the biased views about the capacities of girls and the legitimacy of early marriage. Nearly all of them (92 percent) were no longer in formal education; only 7 percent of them were still in school. When asked about the level of education attained before marriage, only 75 percent (164 of 218) of the young brides provided a response. Of them, 13 percent had never been to school, 38 percent had been to primary school (Classes 1–5, aged 6–10 years), 25 percent had obtained a middle-school education (Classes 7 and 8, aged 11–14), 14 percent had been to secondary school (Classes 9 and 10, aged 14–16), 7 percent had been to senior-secondary school (Class 11 and 12, aged 16–18) and 3 percent had been to college (bachelor of arts or bachelor of education degree courses) (figure 8).

Figure 8 Educational attainment of young brides (n=164)



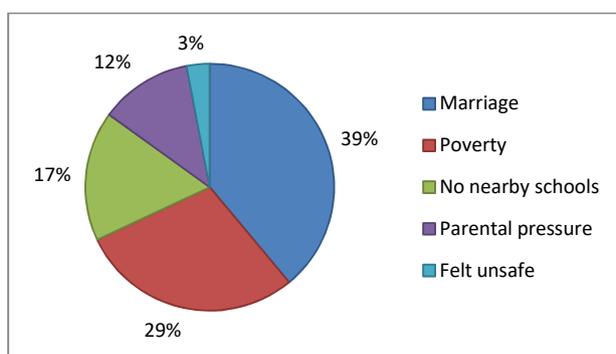
If the girls were married the year they dropped out of school or they left school the year they married, then, 63 percent of the respondents were married between the ages of 6 and 14, while 14 percent were married between the ages of 14 and 16.

Most girls had married well before attaining the legal age, and marriage was related to dropping out of formal education.

On being asked why they had stopped going to school, close to 40 percent of the young brides mentioned marriage as the main reason, while more than a quarter of them cited poverty. Certainly, the unavailability of a middle school and senior-secondary school in the vicinity was a factor in almost all the study villages. Parental pressure and safety were cited by a small proportion of the young brides (figure 9).

Additionally, 43 young brides gave a range of other reasons for dropping out of school: death and/or illness of one or both parents, failure or poor results in school, was asked to take care of younger siblings, household work, fear of physical punishment in school, feeling out of place in school after an engagement and restrictions by husband and in-laws.

Figure 9 Reasons for leaving school (n=171)



More than half of the young brides said that they missed going to school. The largest proportions who said they missed going to school were among the Other Backward Class and Scheduled Caste households and the smallest was among the Scheduled Tribe families.

The proportion of young brides who had friends going to school was also greatest among the Other Backward Classes and the smallest was among the Scheduled Tribe households. More than half of the respondents said that they missed the games they used to play in school with their friends (figures 10 and 11).

Figure 10 Young brides' feelings about missing school (n= 218)

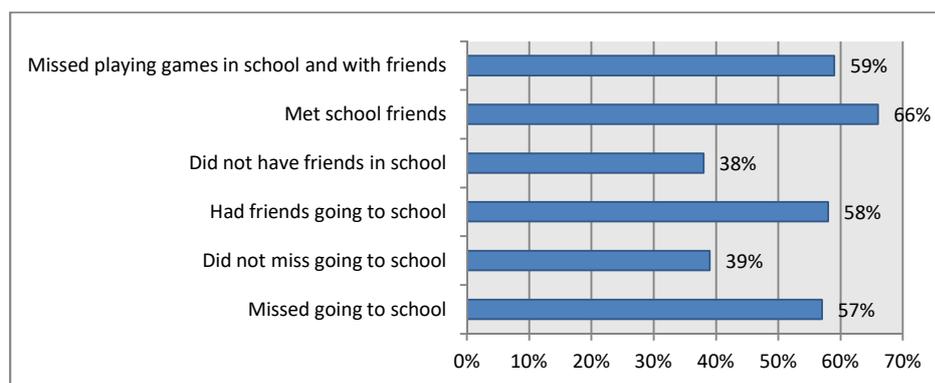
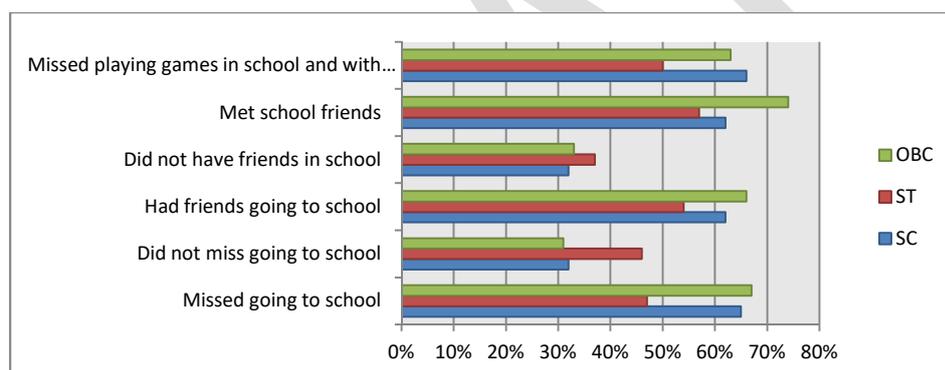


Figure 11 Feelings about missing school, by caste (n=218)



Note: OBC=Other Backward Classes; ST=Scheduled Tribes; SC=Scheduled Castes.

The young brides from communities in which more girls go to school keep in touch with their friends and thus said they miss going to school more. This suggests greater educational aspiration among young girls and their families, despite the prevalent orthodoxy about the incompatibility of education with gender-based norms of marriageability or “settling down”.

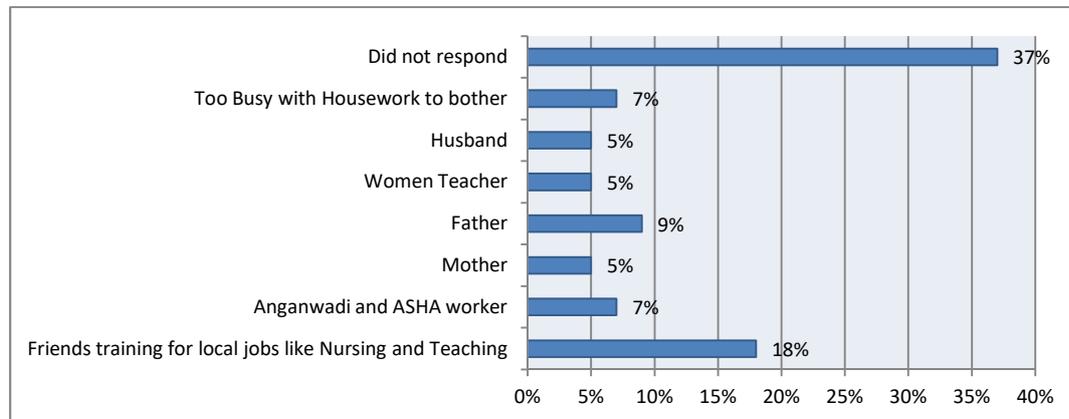
This is indicated by the awareness and willingness among the girls when there are positive role models around them. A small proportion of the young brides who continued formal education were motivated by their friends and were training for local jobs (nursing or teaching) or had friends or relatives working in female-specific jobs, such as in the *anganwadi* or as a community health worker (known as government Accredited Social Health Activists, or ASHA).

Family members, usually fathers, mothers and, in some cases, husbands, were cited by a small number of the young brides as influencing the decision to continue formal education or professional training (figure 12).

Greater intervention work is required among subordinated and impoverished groups, such as the Scheduled Tribes (Bhil) in the study area, where girls are unable to find support or motivation from the peer group or family members. This is especially important in the context

of caste-based inequalities that minimize and severely discourage social interactions among different groups.

Figure 12 Who influenced young brides' decision to continue formal education or professional training (n=218)



Young brides who chose to continue higher education with the support of Vikalp Sansthan faced an uphill struggle, as witnessed by the interviewers during this study. For instance, Kamala was a young bride who had recently applied to take her tenth board examination by filling in the application form against the wishes of her in-laws. She wanted to study and attended a Vikalp camp initially but failed to attend it regularly because of her long hours of work and her in-laws' disapproval. Often, she was weak because she would refuse to eat after each fight she had at her marital home. Nobody supported her in her decision. They asked her what difference it would make even if she obtained higher education. She was angry and rebellious most of the time. Vikalp workers encouraged her to remain calm just so her in-laws would not forbid her from ever leaving home.

Several conversations in the study area indicated that the education of girls is becoming a mark of caste-based respectability, reinforcing the existing social, economic and political hierarchies.

Upper-caste men mentioned that the poor education of girls and early marriage was the problem of "lower castes". During the survey, one interviewer had knocked at a Jain house and the household head had rudely remarked, "You will find such types of early marriage and young brides in the localities of lower castes, not in Jain localities. In our community, girls study and marry late." Educated girls, however, were viewed as cultural resources of the upper-caste households and community rather than education being the means for empowerment, autonomy or self-actualization of individual girls. Poorly educated, early-marrying girls were seen as cultural attributes of the "lower castes".

Pejorative and discriminatory views were also voiced by government community workers, such as *anganwadi* workers and the auxiliary nurse midwife (a village-level female health worker), who have close contact with women in the community.

In a conversation with one of the interviewers, the ASHA worker from Bhumlavas village insisted that child marriages in the area had significantly reduced in the past two years and that the majority of child marriages took place within the "lower castes", like the Gameti and Bhil, due to their poverty and illiteracy; it did not occur among upper castes, such as her own group (Vaishnav). She also said that the *anganwadi* where she worked was located in the Bhil neighborhood and thus the "upper-caste" people did not send their children there. For essential services like immunization of infants, the Vaishnav and the Brahmins only went to the health center in their own locality.

These intersecting dimensions of caste and gender-based inequalities and resulting disadvantages are areas for future attention and intervention.

Among the older women (mothers-in-law of the young brides) interviewed for this study, 115 (of 129) responded to the question on education. Most were young brides in their time. While 77.5 percent of the older women had never been to school, 12 percent had studied through the primary level. On being asked why they had stopped going to school, the women mentioned four reasons overall: marriage, poverty, parental pressure and absence of a nearby school (some parents were afraid girls would be kidnapped from school or en route). Girls, the women said, were expected to stay at home and do housework, help their mothers, raise goats and do farm work.

While more young brides today obtain more years of school education than the previous generation of girls, in many ways their life circumstances and trajectories have not changed to a great extent.

Health, reproduction and childbirth

Development policy literature has described how child marriage almost always results in adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes, vulnerability to gender-based violence, malnutrition and high maternal morbidity and mortality for girls during their youth, throughout their life course and affecting future generations.²

An important aspect of young brides' lives in the study area was their early initiation to sexual activity, leading to early conception, followed by childbirth. Most often, girls are too young and overwhelmed to exercise any choice in decisions about sexual activity, pregnancy and childbirth. What is considered statutory rape in another context is normalized here under the guise of marriage. Shame, secrecy and taboos surrounding any discussion of menstruation, contraception and sexual health also mean that girls go relatively unprepared to their marital home.

This has enormous implication for the overall physical and emotional health and well-being of young women in the study area. Many girls and older women complained about poor health and unspecified conditions for which they rarely sought health care. Although the young brides of today reportedly have fewer children than the previous generation of girls, miscarriages and abortions due to young maternal age are common, frequently unreported and not supported by health care. Most of the interview conversations reflected this uncertain and fearful journey of young women toward sexual intimacy and unwanted pregnancies.

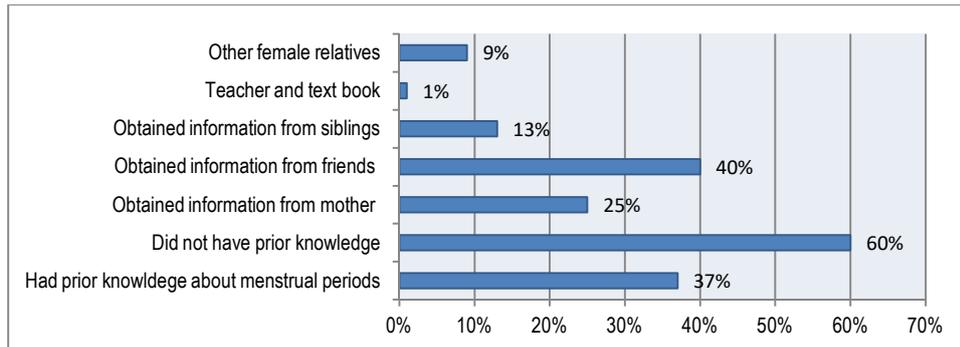
Narayani's story

Twenty-four-year-old Narayani was married at the age of 3 in a group ceremony along with similar-aged cousins. Cohabiting with her husband at the marital home began when she turned 15. She says she started puberty after she moved to her marital home. She was pregnant with her first child within a year of puberty. It was a boy. Her second child, a girl, died of pneumonia at 6 months of age. When she spoke to the interviewer, Narayani was considering a sterilization operation for permanent birth control, even though she regretted not having more sons. Narayani said she had no memory of her marriage ceremony. Her response to questions about education and autonomy through paid work was similar to other young women in her community: While both are viewed as intrinsically good, the young women lacked the words to describe what it is that they seek from education or employment. What appears to be normal for Narayani is the inevitability of dropping out of school and joining the family labor in farming and grazing or doing housework.

² See, for example, www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/1.-Addressing-child-marriage-Health.pdf.

More than half of the young brides had lacked knowledge of menstrual periods until they experienced it. Most of them learned or sought information about menstruation from their mother, friends or siblings; a small portion asked a teacher and read about it in a schoolbook, according to our survey (figure 13). But then when asked about menstruation, in terms of whether they discussed it any detail, both the older women and the young brides replied that they had never spoken to their mothers about their periods. “We were ashamed to speak to our mothers about such things,” explained one woman. Girls sought information from their mothers and other female relations and friends after they had experienced menstruation. They were not encouraged to discuss it in any detail even with their mothers.

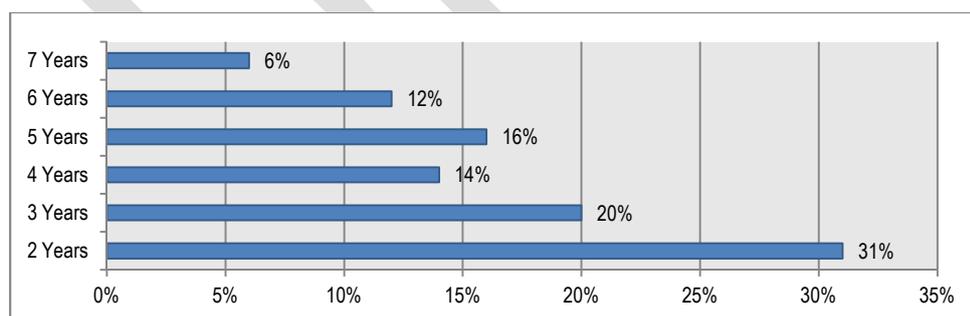
Figure 13 Young brides’ knowledge about menstruation (n= 143)



Menstrual restrictions are prevalent among both Hindu and Muslim communities. Young brides mentioned that they are not allowed to touch mango pickles and preserves when they are menstruating because it is believed it would spoil the food. They are also not permitted to participate in religious rituals. Some of the young women said they are forbidden to touch drinking water kept for other family members, while others mentioned having to eat separately from family members during the days they are menstruating. Such practices create a negative self-image for young girls and hurt their confidence.

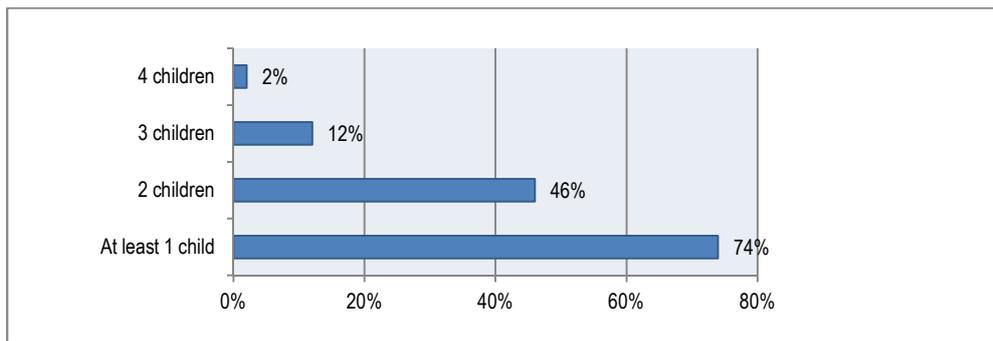
The gap between starting puberty and first childbirth was found to be narrow among the young brides: 31 percent of them gave birth within two years of the onset of puberty, 20 percent within three years and 14 percent within four years (figure 14).

Figure 14 Gap between starting puberty and child birth (n=143)



Among the respondents, the average age at the start of puberty was 13 years; yet, more than half them had given birth to at least one child by the age of 16. The age at which sexual activity occurred following the formalization of marriage (when the young bride moved from the natal home to live in the marital home) was thus quite young among the respondents. Early conception also suggests pressure from family and the unavailability of contraception knowledge and/or use among the young brides. Most of the young brides had at least one child at the time of the study (figure 15).

Figure 15 Children among the young brides (n=218)

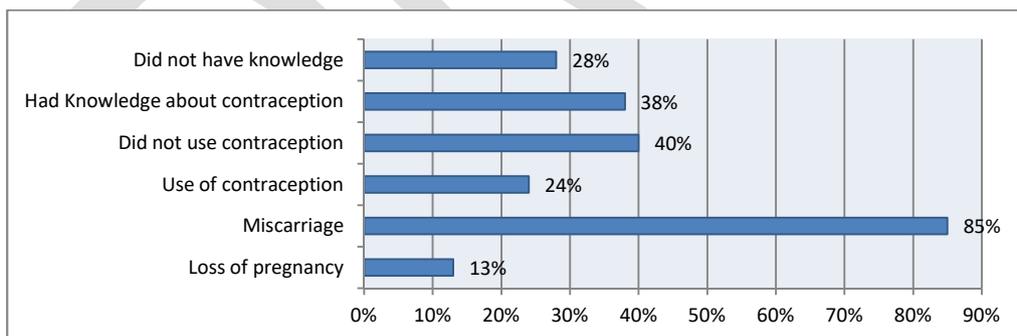


Some young brides reported losing a pregnancy due to miscarriage, abortion, stillbirth or other reason. The largest proportion of loss was through miscarriage (85 percent). While 38 percent of the respondents were aware of contraception, 28 percent reported not being aware of it, and the rest refused to answer the question.

Fewer than a quarter of the young brides reported using some form of contraceptive, while 40 percent said they did not use anything, and 40 percent refused to answer this question (figure 16). Contraceptive use is considered an issue about which male decision-making is prevalent. Answers about contraception ranged from “My husband refuses to use” to “I feel scared”. Many of the young brides wanted to get the “operation” (sterilization through tubectomy) but were not allowed to do so. A few women also mentioned local medicine (*desi davaa*) that they used as contraceptive. Access to contraceptives and the knowledge about them was limited.

The interviewers were surprised when the female anganwadi worker in Changedi village also refused to answer questions about contraception. The *anganwadi* worker had received more years of education than the young brides in general. She had completed school and college and wanted to become a teacher but did not get permission from her husband to take the exam for a Bachelor of Education degree. She had two children, and on being asked about contraceptives and whether she had used them, she replied that she didn’t know much and had never used any.

Figure 16 Contraception and miscarriages (n=218)



A preference for boys affected decisions to have more children. Nearly half of the respondents felt that they needed to have at least one male child. Young brides could not dispute decisions about repeated and frequent pregnancies because of the pressure from their husband and in-laws. When one young bride who had a son was asked by interviewers if she wanted another child, she replied no. But her mother-in-law shouted at her, “How dare you say you don’t want another one! We want at least one more boy, like the pair of Ram and Lakshman.”

In the past, repeated pregnancies typically resulted in maternal and infant mortality. The increase in institutional births, incentivized by public campaigns, could be one reason why the maternal and infant mortality rates have lowered. Of the 155 young brides who reported giving birth to

one child, 81 percent did so in a public hospital; only 16 percent gave birth at home, with or without the support of a traditional birth attendant or an auxiliary nurse midwife. Of the 114 older women who were interviewed (mothers-in-law of the young brides), 82 percent gave birth at home with the support of a traditional birth attendant, 14 percent had no traditional birth attendant support, and only 4 percent gave birth in a public hospital.

Some 29 older women shared details about one or more cases of an infant’s death occurring within a few days of their giving birth. Among them, a total of 38 babies did not survive (which means seven women had two babies who died).

Among those 38 deaths, 12 of the babies were female. Four of the deaths were attributed to lack or inability to provide medical care.

Despite the reduction in maternal and child mortality through institutional births, some older women disparaged hospitals to the interviewers, describing them as an affectation of young brides who lacked resilience. For instance, one woman lamented, “During our times, no one went anywhere. Children were born at home. We did not need anyone. Girls nowadays run to the doctor the moment they feel some pain.”

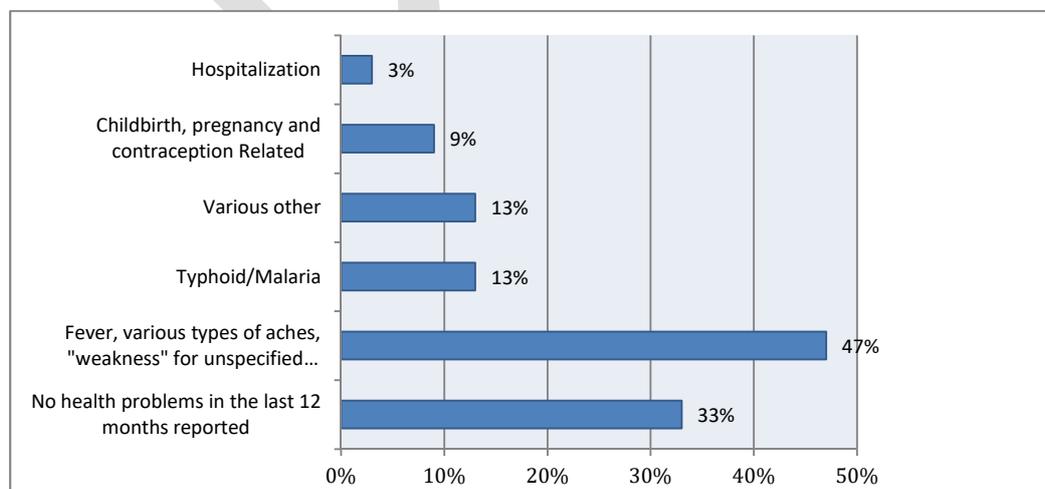
Older women also attributed diseases, illnesses and infant deaths to attacks by evil spirits. “My child died because of the bad wind,” one woman insisted. Because older women wield considerable power and influence on the lives of young brides, their experiences and views around conception, birth of children and health care need to change for the sake of positive health outcomes. This is a relatively neglected area of intervention in the context of early marriage prevention.

Much discussion of women’s health in the context of early marriage tends to take place around reproductive health. It is also important to understand the perceived sense of ill health among young brides who are expected to be strong and healthy, perform laboring duties at home and in farms and are discouraged to express feelings about their well-being or seek health care.

Most of the young brides reported general feelings of poor health, with 65 percent reporting that they were in good health only on some days.

Of the 146 young brides who reported health problems in the 12 months prior to the interview, nearly half of them mentioned fever and various kinds of aches and general weakness. Others reported suffering from typhoid or malaria, childbirth, pregnancy and sterilization-related complications. Some respondents attributed their ailments to spirit possession (figure 17). Attending to general health-related needs of young brides is an important area of intervention.

Figure 17 Reported health status in the previous 12 months (n=146)



Early marriage and violence

It was difficult for the young brides to speak openly about the various forms of violence they had experienced within the apparent security of their marital home. The interviewers were mostly unsuccessful in obtaining responses to direct questions about physical or sexual violence. The girls were more forthcoming about domestic violence in some cases, perhaps because of the general acceptance of it as a form of discipline. The interviews with selected young men (grooms) presented in the next section underscored how such behavior by men toward their wife demonstrated and upheld norms of masculinity in the local society. Often, violence was viewed (among those men) as what occurs when a young bride acts against the norms of docile and dependent persons.

Manju's story

Manju is a 15-year-old Bhil girl who reported frequently fighting with her husband. She told the interviewers that he had beaten her on many occasions. Manju justified her husband's abuse by saying that occasional hitting was acceptable because he was otherwise very fond of her and did not drink alcohol, like other men. According to Manju, regular disputes and beating happened because she had the "bad habit" of answering back. Women were not supposed to talk back in a raised voice to their husband.

She also mentioned that her visits to her natal home were restricted, and her husband always accompanied her during these visits. Manju has a daughter who is 1 year old. She and her daughter are frequently unwell. Manju described her pregnancy, within one year of marriage, as "her husband's wish". She was engaged to be married at the age of 10 and had dropped out of school once she reached puberty, three years later, with increasing pressure from her in-laws to formalize the marriage. She wanted to pursue tailoring but was awaiting her husband's approval of the plan and the purchase of a sewing machine.

To address the young brides' general discomfort in discussing violence, a few indirect questions were asked, such as what was their worst memory from the marriage.

When asked about their worst memory, more than half of the respondents mentioned that they did not want to marry, a large majority mentioned being upset or anxious about leaving their home, and more than a quarter said leaving school. A smaller number mentioned forced sexual intercourse, physical violence, verbal abuse, burden of housework, childbirth-related complications and monetary stress.

Some 37 respondents recalled the worst time from their marriage as their husband's alcoholism and his speaking in a loud voice; being very young and not understanding what marriage was about; missing their family and friends; the husband not being a "good person"; giving birth; unfamiliarity of their new surroundings; the practice of veiling; and not being able to study. Most of the young brides experienced fear and anxiety after their marriage. Many mentioned being afraid of their mother-in-law: not being able to please her with their work and fear of shouting and beatings (figure 18). Most of the young brides reported being pressured into marriage by their father and mother and, in some cases, by other male relations, such as a grandfather. Some respondents also mentioned being pressured by in-laws and societal norms.

When asked what they had liked most about their marriage, 40 percent of the young brides said that they enjoyed the wedding celebration. Nearly half of them said that they liked the jewelry and nice clothes that they wore on the wedding day, and 30 percent said they enjoyed the companionship. Few of the young brides articulated other advantages, such as improvement in social status, economic security or having children (figure 19).

Figure 18 Young brides' worst memory of marriage (n=218)

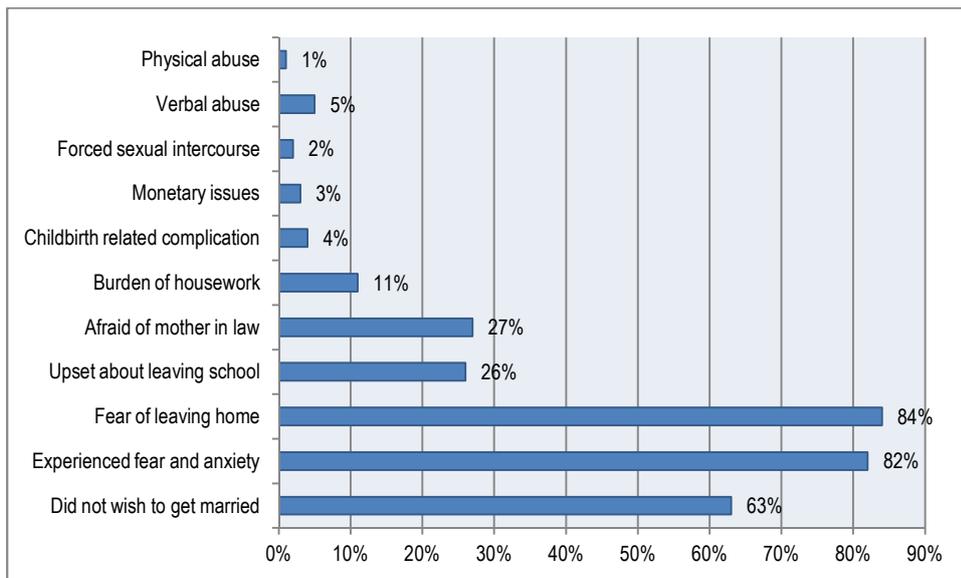
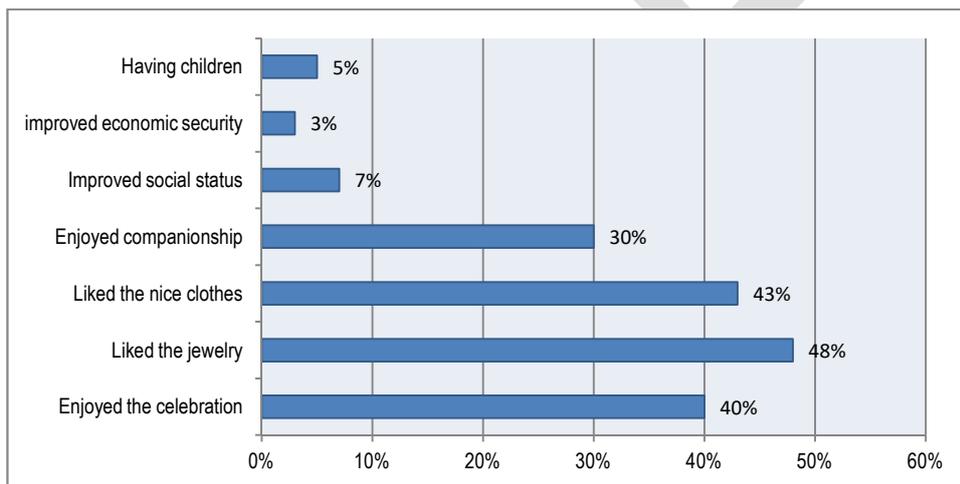


Figure 19 What young brides liked about marriage (n=218)

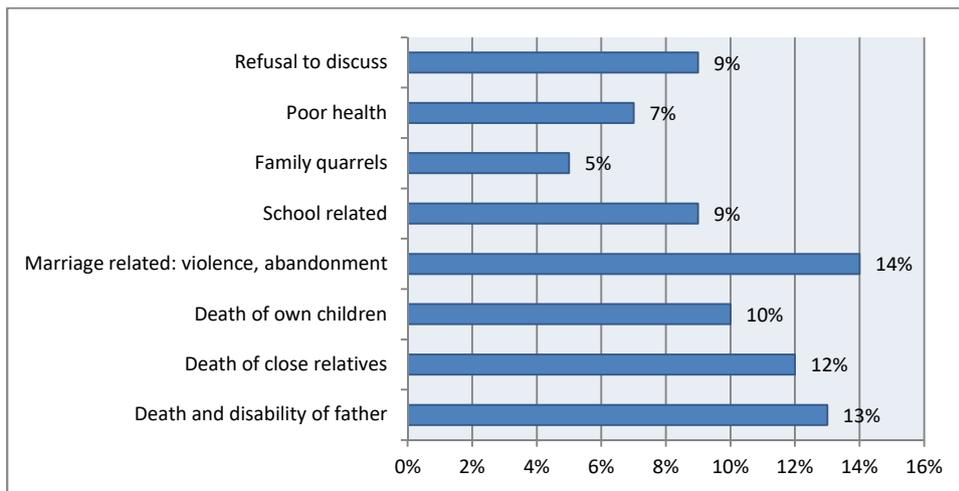


These responses confirm the Vikalp Sansthan viewpoint that young brides, through their socialization, are most attracted to the special attention they receive on the occasion of their marriage, with little thought or expectation of any return beyond the day of the ceremony.

To further probe the young brides' experiences, the interviewers asked them to describe any serious incident in their life and any serious incident in the life of a close friend, neighbor or other woman. The interviewers thought that the young brides might be more inclined to describe less-personal stories. Some 30 percent of the young brides mentioned the death or disablement of a close relation, such as their father, grandparent, mother, sibling or child, as the most serious incident of their life. Among the marriage-related issues, the respondents cited facing abuse or violence from the husband, abandonment or the dissolution of the marriage.

Other incidents were related to failing in school and dropping out, family quarrels, being unwell or hurt through violence (including one case in which the respondent said she was raped by a friend and was asked to take an abortion pill). In feminist literature, a girl or woman being affected by the death of a father or other male guardian has been described as "patriarchal risk": abrupt decline in welfare and social status if she loses male guardianship (figure 20) (Cain et al., 1979, cited in Kabeer, 2005: 4710).

Figure 20 What young brides liked about marriage (n=218)

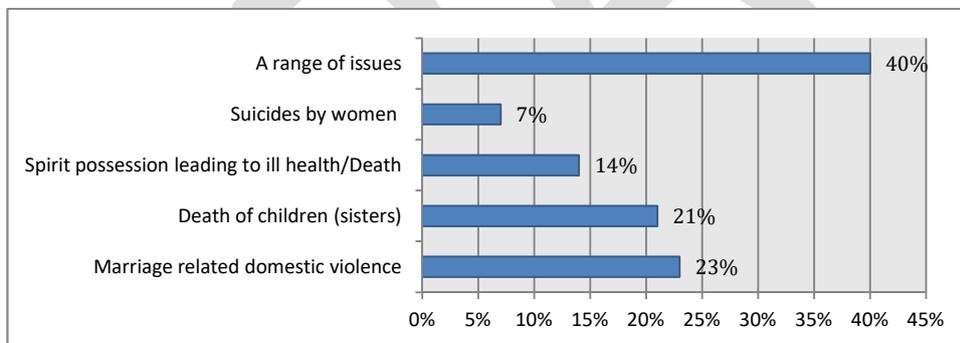


A total of 43 young brides responded to the question of a serious incident experienced by someone they knew. Nearly a quarter of them cited violence by the husband who consumed alcohol and beat his wife. Others spoke about the death of a child and complications around childbirth (mostly a sister was mentioned in this situation); spirit possession causing her ill health; death; and mental instability.

A worrying finding were the three reported cases of suicides by women who killed themselves by “jumping into a well” after being beaten by their husband.

A range of other distressing issues, such as illness, death, fights, desertion, running away from home and mental illness were also discussed (figure 21).

Figure 21 Serious incident in someone else’s life (n=43)

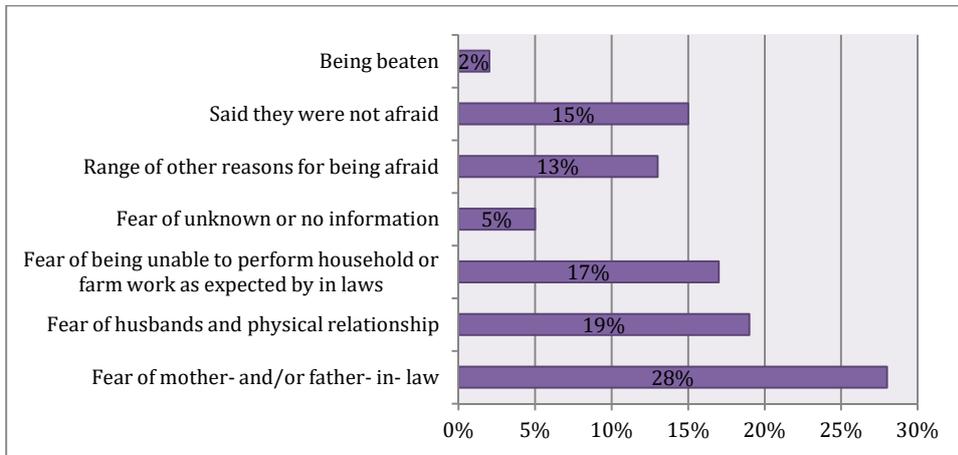


When older women (mothers-in-law of the young brides) were asked what had made them feel anxious about getting married, their responses were similar to and as guarded as those by the younger women. Of the 109 older women who responded, more than a quarter of them said that they had been afraid of their mother-in-law and, in some cases, the father-in-law (this proportion was similar to the responses by the younger women, 26 percent of whom expressed fear of their mother-in-law). They were afraid of not fulfilling expectations and being scolded or beaten as a consequence.

The remaining older women said they were afraid of the physical relationship with or “being alone” with their husband. Some said that they had little prior knowledge about sexual relationships and were afraid of what would happen to them. An equal proportion of women were afraid that they would not be able to fulfil expectations around housework or farm work. They were afraid of the consequences if the work done by them did not please their mother- or sister-in-law. They were also afraid of living in a strange place, meeting new people and a

possible inability to “please everyone”. A few recalled experiences of beatings that made them afraid (figure 22).

Figure 22 Older women’s fears and anxiety after marriage (n=109)

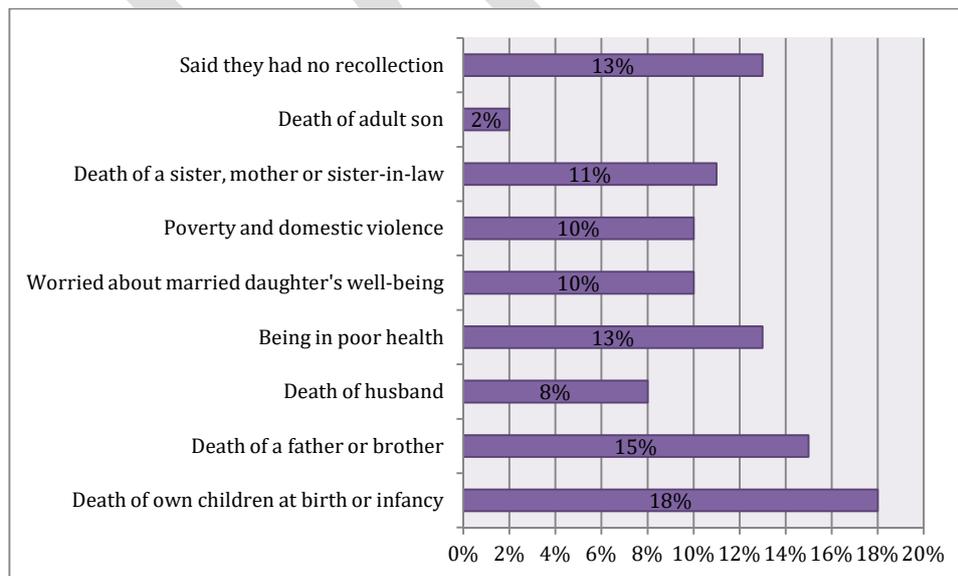


When older women were asked to describe any serious incident from their life that had affected them considerably, again, their responses were similar to those by the young brides. As well, many older women (mothers-in-law of young brides talking about their own lives) mentioned the death of a child and anxiety about their married daughters’ well-being (figure 23). One respondent said she had given birth to six daughters and was tormented by her husband and his family for the lack of a son. The birth of the seventh child, at last a boy, saved her marriage.

Another woman described the death of her younger sister, who died at the marital home at the age of 12 or 13 years. She blamed the in-laws for the death, “They did not take care of my sister.” When she learned that her daughter’s husband was beating her, she brought her home and organized a second marriage for her.

The responses of the younger brides and older women (who were young brides once) suggest that fear and anxiety about performing the new roles expected of them by strangers in an unfamiliar place and the consequences of failing to do so are inextricably linked to the experience of being married as children. As women grew older, they were consumed with anxieties about their own daughters.

Figure 23 Older women’s description of a serious incident (n=106)



Sexual division of labor and young brides

It is well established that the sexual division of labor, especially the long hours of socially undervalued and unpaid domestic labor, is detrimental for girls and women, restricting their life options and adversely affecting their living standards over time (McKintosh, 1981). The lives of the young brides in this study followed this pattern, characterized by hard labor in the marital homes and farm. In the poorer communities, they had the added burden of wage labor. Even though girls are socialized from a young age to perform endless chores uncomplainingly (along with attending school), this study reinforces that their work increases significantly after they move to a marital home.

Following an engagement, a groom's family tends to step up the pressure on the bride's natal family to send her to the marital home because they perceive that the labor of the bride has already transferred to her new family and kin group. The marital family claims both productive and reproductive labor entitlement of the young bride, leaving her with little room to maneuver within the frame that is described by sociologists as "patriarchal bargaining". As the previous section illustrated, young brides (and older women) fear their mother-in-law more than their husband. The marital home is a strange new place at first, compounded by the need to work in it under the close supervision of the mother-in-law, who is often critical and disciplining. The following case of Lakshmi highlights how school life followed by employment is a welcome escape from the predictable fate that awaits most young brides.

Lakshmi's story

Lakshmi was engaged when she was 3 years old and married in a common ceremony with her elder sister when she was 8. After failing to pass the Class 10 examinations, she gave up studying. As well and on the advice of the village *bavji* (the village spirit), her parents advised her to discontinue her studies. She felt ashamed that among all her siblings, she was the only one who had failed to matriculate. Although she was married, Lakshmi lived at her natal home to pursue education because her father supported her efforts. Lakshmi was increasingly under pressure to move to her marital home. But she was not keen to live there. Whenever she visited the husband's family for short periods of time, they had made her work hard on the farm and with the household work, from feeding cattle and cleaning cattle sheds to fetching water, cooking, cleaning utensils and washing clothes. After each visit, she would be exhausted. Her in-laws were not interested in her education or her aspiration to seek employment. They wanted her to give birth soon and do housework.

They also disapproved of her staying at her natal home because they feared that this could ruin her reputation. Lakshmi's husband was also studying in Class 10 and she thought that he would understand why she wanted to continue her education. She had less hope from her in-laws. Lakshmi wished that her marriage would end, but she was worried that her parents might not be able to afford the compensation that they would have to pay her in-laws if she walked out of the marriage. Lakshmi told the interviewers that she thanked God for inventing something "like education", without which all girls would be married at a very young age and they would spend their lives working and suffering in the marital home.

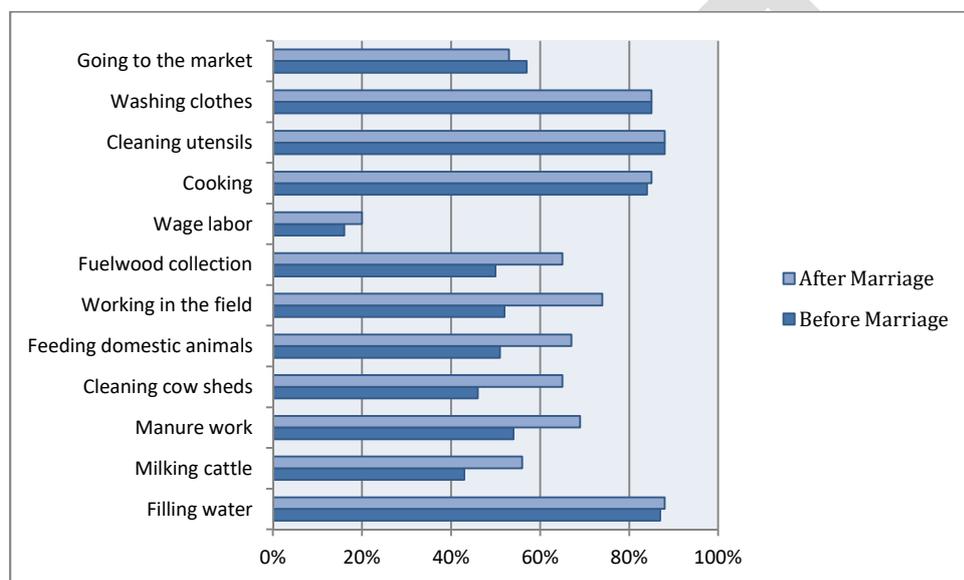
The respondents were asked to describe the work they did prior to and following their marriage. Before-marriage tasks included fetching water, milking cattle, manure (dung) collection, cleaning cow sheds, feeding domestic animals, working in the field, looking after smaller siblings, caring for sick person at home, cooking, washing clothes, cleaning utensils, fuelwood collection and shopping in the market. After marriage, the proportion of girls performing some of the laboring tasks increased, such as milking animals, manure collection, cleaning cow sheds, feeding domestic animals, working in the field, fuelwood collection, farm work, wage labor and market work (figure 24). Those tasks were in addition to natal household tasks. Their involvement with harder tasks and poorer household wage labor increased after shifting to the marital home. The

young brides told the interviewers that they could not stop working even when they were unwell and that they received little help from family members in the marital home.

On being asked whether men had the same pressure of domestic work, one young bride replied, “They work outside and come home.” When asked by interviewers whether young brides also worked in the fields and did all the domestic chores, most of the grooms who were interviewed echoed what one man professed, “Yes, but they are women, right?”

Although women’s contribution to unpaid domestic work consumes a disproportionate amount of their time and energy and contributes to their subordination is well established, in the context of young brides, the situation is compounded by the fact that these are young adolescents, whose captive labor is legitimized and sanctioned by the institution of marriage. Due to early marriage, their burden begins early and continues till late in life, limiting the possibilities of seeking an alternative future.

Figure 24 Work burden of young brides before and after marriage (n=218)



Breaking marriage and financial transactions

Often, young brides are unable to escape oppressive conditions because they have little control over the elaborate customary money transactions and decision-making around such exchanges that seal the marriage contract. While marriage provides only the illusion of security to young brides, as the previous section points out, the breakdown of a marriage has a different set of adverse consequences for girls and women.

During this study, the older women were asked questions that explored the modalities of marriage dissolutions. A total of 107 older women who responded to the question of whether marriages were known to end mentioned that such an event involves a high cost for the party deemed to be at fault. Ending a marriage entails a fine, penalties and compensation. In a case in which a marriage ends due to disputes between the husband and wife or the husband or wife refuses to stay with each other, a cash penalty of 50,000–500,000 rupees must be paid by the party at fault. According to some of the older women respondents, decisions about who was at fault is made by the caste *panchayats*, based on evidence presented to them. Muslim respondents mentioned that the *meher* amount (payment in money or possessions by groom’s father) must be given by the husband’s family to the wife if the marriage ends. *Meher* is an amount that the groom has agreed to pay to his bride before the marriage is contracted as per the Muslim marriage law. If the marriage ends and a divorce is initiated by the husband, he must

give the entire amount of *meher* to the wife. *Meher* can be in cash or in kind and can include both movable and immovable property, which is the right of the Muslim wife.

Only 17 percent of the respondents thought that the groom's family should pay the fine if the husband is at fault for the marriage ending. Some said that the level of fine had gone up in recent times from a nominal amount in the past. There is a general understanding that mostly it is the husband who walks away from a marriage. Women are less likely to leave. As one respondent explained, "A woman who walks out of her marriage is like a dead person." In some cases, legal divorce is sought, and no fine is paid.

One respondent recalled a case in which the bride's family was refusing to send their girl, who was married to her son, after repeated requests. Finally seeking an explanation, the respondent learned that the girl had been married into another household simultaneously and sent to live there. The respondent said that she had taken the matter to the caste *panchayat* and received a compensation of 40,000 rupees from the bride's family.

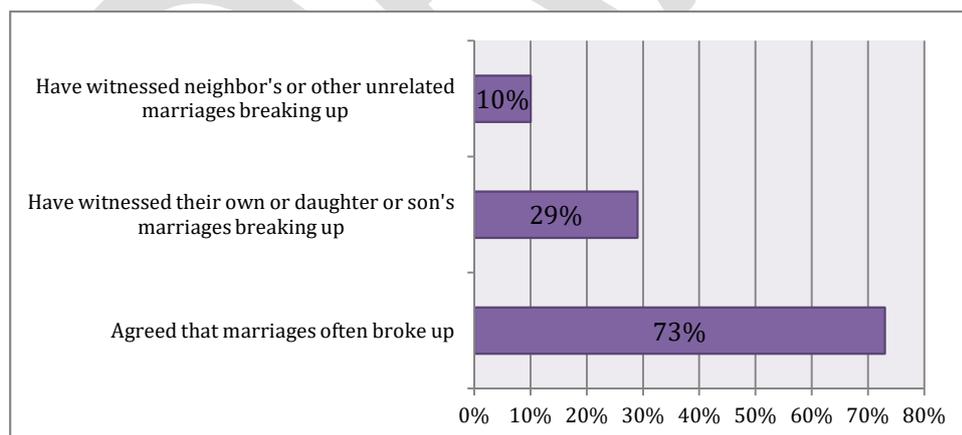
Most examples of marriages ending related to the husband walking away or contracting another relationship. One respondent said her son-in-law had ended the marriage because he did not like her daughter and they had received 50,000 rupees in compensation from the boy's household. In an unusual case, the respondent's sister-in-law had walked out of her marriage because her husband drank alcohol. She had to pay a fine of 60,000 rupees to her husband's family.

Sometimes marriages break apart because of disagreement between the contracting families. One elderly respondent explained that her first marriage (at the age of 10) broke up because her father quarreled with her father-in-law. She was then sent to another household as a bride at the age of 15. This example shows the limited agency of young brides who may be parceled from one strange home to another, if the contracting parties—her natal and marital kin—fall out over some issue.

In some cases, domestic violence was cited as the reason for a marriage breaking up.

Overall, there was a sense of acceptance among the older women that a marriage could end and a new one could be contracted (figure 25).

Figure 25 Older women and broken marriages (n=107)



These interviews reveal a significant aspect regarding marriage, be it a Muslim or a Hindu community. While the dissolution of an early marriage or marriage agreement is not unusual, girls do not have control over it. The arbitrating role of the caste *panchayat* points to the power of caste relations within the communities.

Second, informal marriages, or *nata*

What options are available to young brides when their marriage dissolves? In the past, second, informal marriages, or *nata*, were contracted by some women in the study area who were married as children but whose marriage ended. The cases provided here suggest that *nata* is a less prestigious form of relationship because it is not considered a “true marriage”. The elected female village *panchayat* leader (*up-sarpanch*) of Changedi told the interviewers that while men can marry again, women cannot remarry, they can only contract *nata*. On being asked why, she replied, “This is how it happens here. Women can’t do second marriage, only men.” This means that women do not usually initiate a *nata* relationship.

She further described the penalty for ending a marriage in terms of the male prerogative, even in the case of *nata*: “When men contract a second marriage, they pay their first wife some money. How would she run the household without money?” But if a woman ends the marriage and chooses to enter *nata*, the man with whom she contracts the *nata* relationship must pay money to compensate the first husband. The dominant understanding of *nata pratha* or the custom of *nata* attributes little agency to women, who continue in this case to be transacted among different men. The interviewers spoke with several older women who had entered into a *nata* relationship after a divorce, separation or widowhood. In these accounts, the precarious nature of the relationship was highlighted, although the women attributed greater agency to themselves.

Pappuri’s story

Pappuri, 40, a widowed Bhil woman, entered into a *nata* because she needed support to raise her five children. The Bhil man she moved in with had been married once before and needed help with his farm work. Unlike a child marriage, of which decision-making is primarily by the parents and family members of the bride and groom, *nata* relations may sometimes be decided and entered into by consenting adults.

Often when men contract a *nata* relationship, the woman they leave face consequences when their marriage ends.

Ratni’s story

Ratni, a Banjara woman in her late twenties, did daily wage work at a nearby marble factory. A few years back her husband had deserted her. She had been married early and had three children, with the youngest child 8 years old at the time of the interview. She had been married at the age of 18 and had never been to school. Her husband was a manual wage laborer and had entered into a *nata* relationship with another woman. She did not contemplate a similar relationship for herself because of her concern that her new partner would mistreat her children. Despite her hard life, she lived at the edge of the village, on land donated by villagers and went about unveiled and with unrestricted mobility.

Radha’s story

Thirty-one-year-old Radha had an atypical situation. She had been married twice. She had left her first husband because he was violent and an alcoholic, despite having two children with him. She had come to live in Vasni Khurd village after marrying her current husband. The latter has also been married before. Unlike other marriages discussed so far, this was an arrangement between consenting adults. However, Radha’s natal family had turned their back on her for this action. Second, informal marriages are often fragile and low status, and Radha was facing the prospect of abandonment at the time of this interview. Radha’s second husband worked as a driver and their relationship was in trouble because they did not have any children. He blamed Radha for this and was threatening to marry a younger woman.

Kanchan's story

Kanchan, a mother of two small children, was more educated than her husband, who had never been to school. Married in a group ceremony with four of her sisters, Kanchan was only 3 years old, the youngest among the brides. She stayed at her natal home and completed her school education and vocational training in tailoring for a year before going to live in her husband's home when she was 19 years old. That Kanchan and her parents lived in the city of Ahmedabad and not in their origin village for most of her childhood was probably what made this choice possible. Further training for a professional course, such as nursing or teaching, which she had planned, was not possible when she became pregnant soon after moving to her in-laws' home. Her husband had insisted that she pursue her professional training courses, but she had worried about burdening him with childcare and housework and had chosen to forego a career. For Kanchan, that he is a hardworking husband (he worked as a cook in a sweet shop) who does not consume alcohol and is not violent compensates for his not being literate. This was a second marriage, or *nata*, which may explain why city-bred Kanchan, with a comparatively higher level of education, was married to a man who did not appear to be of equivalent status.

Nata has been defined as a distinct socio-cultural practice, different from marriage because it is not accompanied by a ceremony, such as *phera*, the ritual of taking vows by going around a sacred fire (Pancholi and Hemadri, 2006). The *nata* involves a money transaction whereby the man pays the natal family of the woman with whom he will live with. *Nata* is done with the acceptance of the families and sometimes the woman herself, in a cordial atmosphere and is understood as "almost a marriage". Yet, it is stigmatic for the woman and her natal family. This relationship allows the transfer of the woman's reproductive and productive labor to another man and reinforces the outside control over her sexuality and agency in the event that her first marriage ends because her spouse dies or abandons her.

The significance of *nata* in the study area indicates the precarious nature of life for girls and young women who have limited options available to them once their marriage dissolves within the context of the deeply embedded gender inequality of Rajasthan society. Most often, women cannot leave oppressive marriages, but they can face desertion or discrimination when widowed due to lack of education, employment, income, unsupportive families and communities and ineffective laws. Being young brides therefore determines the predictably oppressive paths that women take as they grow older, within or outside their marriage.

The next section explores briefly the experiences of young men who also enter into marriage fairly early.

SECTION III VIEWPOINTS OF YOUNG GROOMS

The prevalence of early marriage affects girls and boys in Rajasthan State. The case of young grooms is comparatively under-researched. In this study, 50 young married men from seven villages were interviewed about their experiences and expectations from marriage.

Generally speaking for the male respondents in this study, it seems early marriage was a way of disciplining and directing the lives of the boys toward the perpetuation of caste and community boundaries and the reinforcement of gender hierarchies.

After these young men married during their adolescence, many of them were unable to pursue their education and employment opportunities beyond a certain point. Many feel the acute burden of being a “bread winner” and taking on family responsibilities at an early age and the loss of agency.

Suresh’s story

Suresh is 22 years old and a Rajput caste member living in Ognakheda village. He was married in 2002 when just 8 years old and studying in Class 3. He did not drop out of school but managed to study to Class 12. He worked on a farm and now has a small milk business. His daughter is 18 months old. He feels he had to set aside his aspirations for higher education due to the pressure of family responsibility. He regrets leaving school but is also reconciled to his situation. He said, “I can’t go beyond my parents’ word as I am supposed to fulfil all their wishes.” As a son, it was his duty to listen to them.

Nearly half of the young grooms interviewed for this study were aged 19–21, and around 20 percent were aged 16–18. Most of them had completed their upper-primary school education and nearly all worked in the informal economy, with wage labor and farming as their main occupation in the 12 months prior to the interview. A quarter of the young grooms already had one child, and a smaller proportion had two children (figures 26–29). On being asked about their aspirations before marriage, slightly more than half said they did not have any such thoughts and more than a quarter reported an unspecified “good job”.

On being asked about their aspirations for the future, most of the male respondents mentioned an unspecified “good” or “normal” life (figures 30 and 31). The young grooms were from economically poor backgrounds, with limited education or employment aspirations for the future. Child marriage seems to have cemented them into a life course and social status determined in their adolescence. In some ways, these boys were trapped in the vicious cycle of enforced adulthood and domestic responsibilities before gathering any life experiences.

Figure 26 Profile of young grooms

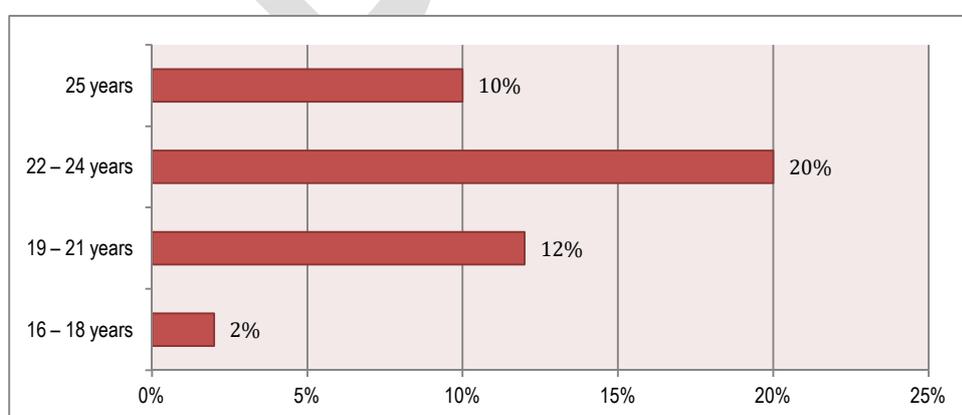


Figure 27 Educational attainment of the young grooms

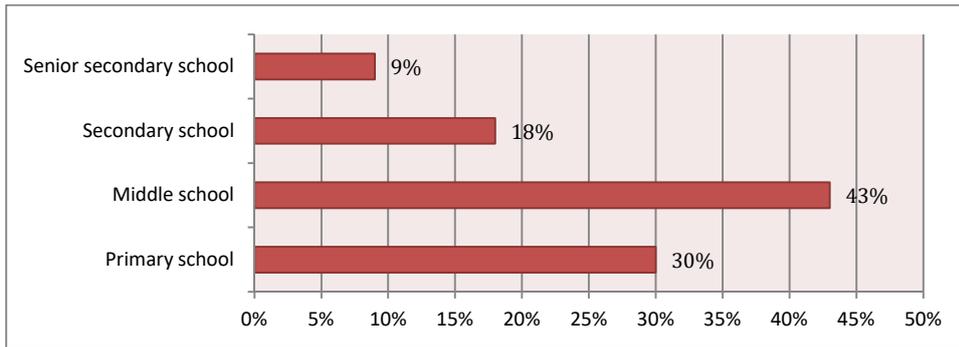


Figure 28 Main income-generating occupation in the previous 12 months

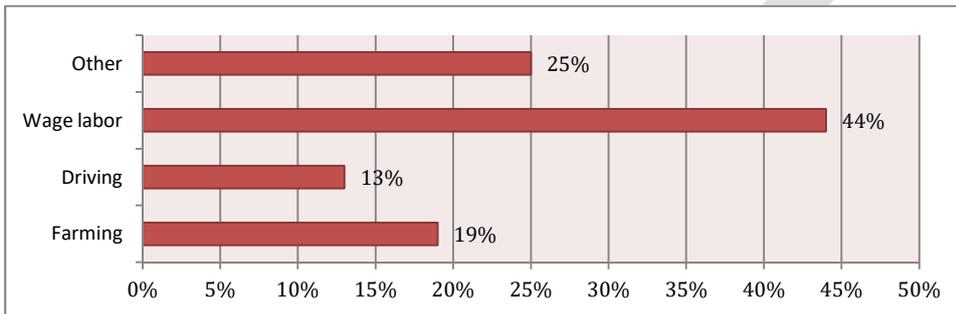


Figure 29 Number of young grooms with at least one child

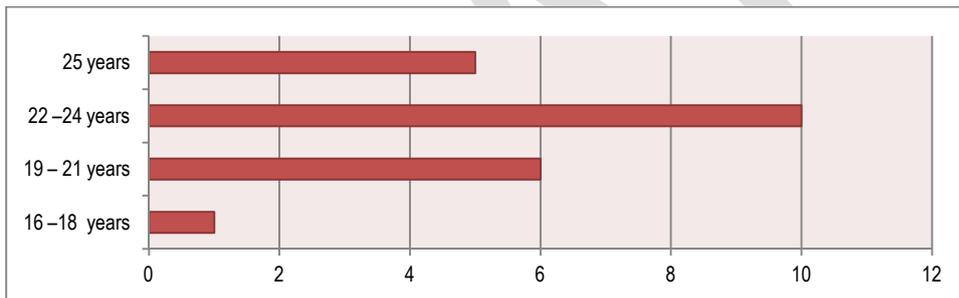


Figure 30 Young grooms' aspirations before marriage

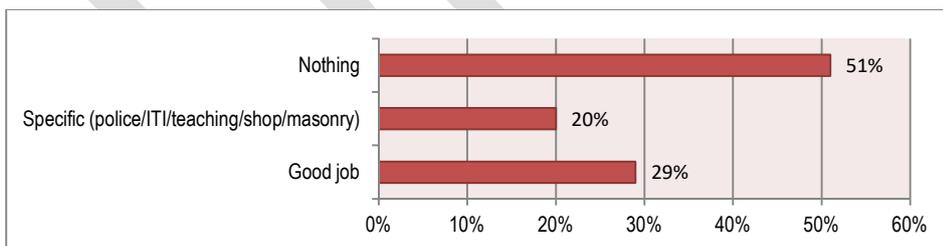
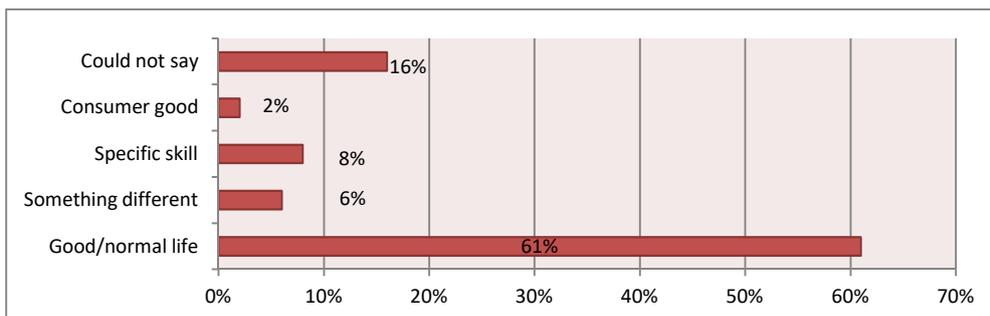


Figure 31 Young grooms' future aspirations



Ideas of masculinity

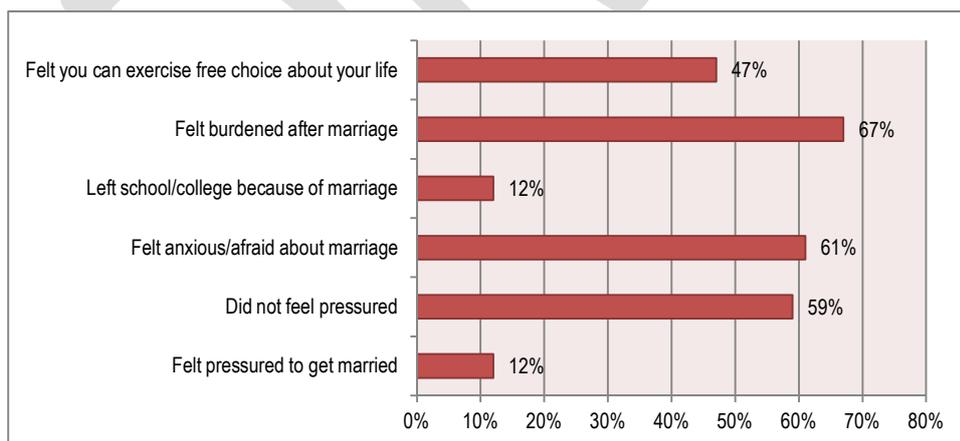
Most of the young grooms interviewed for this study said they did not feel pressured into getting married, but all reported less autonomy in the decision-making about their marriage. Thus, while being married early was a normal life cycle event for them, it was also accompanied by feelings of anxiety and fear before marriage and feelings of being burdened with responsibilities afterwards. Most of the young grooms talked of stereotypical attributes associated with rural masculinity, such as physical strength and the breadwinning role. Most of them, however, reported less autonomy in decision-making because elder family members (parents) assumed control over their life. More than half of the respondents felt that they could not make decisions against their parents' wishes.

Jagdish's story

Jagdish is 18 and a member of the Banjara caste. He was married four years ago, while still in middle school. At that time, he was scared and nervous about the marriage and spoke to his teachers about it. They consoled him but expressed their inability to interfere in the family matter. Currently, his wife is studying in Class 10 and he is in Class 12. He wants both he and his wife to finish school and study further. They meet whenever she visits the marital home, usually during festivals. He is fine with this arrangement. But with graduation nearing, pressure from his family is increasing to bring his wife home. People from their community (caste) have pressured his parents, saying, "How can a married woman still stay in her mother's house?" He felt that "bringing his wife" would hurt his future education and career goals. Most boys from his caste ended their academic education for vocational training or other business after finishing school, and he is expected to follow the same course.

It can be argued that even if young men are not ready for marriage, parental pressure and community norms make matrimony appear to be a normal life course event. Nearly half of them felt that they were unable to exercise free choice regarding their life choices (figure 32). Some of the young grooms, like Jagdish, wanted to delay the arrival of the bride to the marital home as long as possible. Ability to meet educational attainment is compromised for both girls and boys when they succumbed to parental pressure. Early marriage is not attractive for young men from some ambitious and relatively better-off households.

Figure 32 Young grooms' feelings about marriage

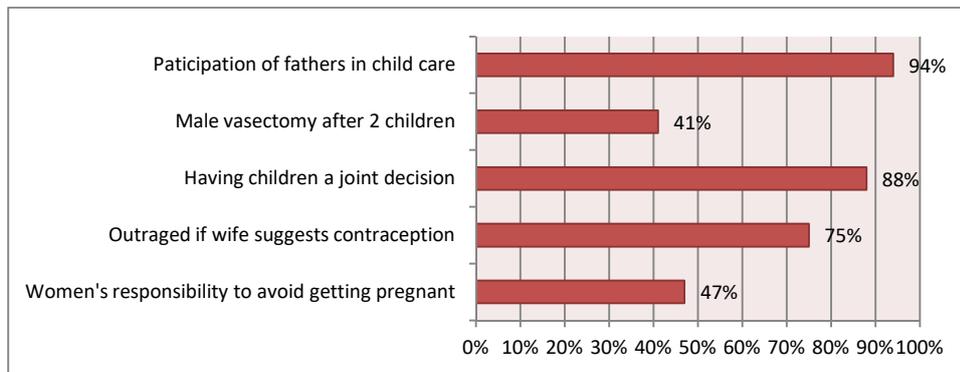


Dominant notions of masculinity that shape the socialization of young men complicate ideas around conception and contraception, giving rise to contradictory responses. While a large majority of the young groom respondents felt that childbirth decisions should be jointly taken, and fathers should have a contributing role in childrearing, a large proportion of them also said that women are responsible for avoiding pregnancy, but they would be outraged if their wife suggested they use contraception.

Some of the young grooms boasted of relationships with girls and women outside their marriage. Several spoke about their plan to have a second wife or continue an ongoing parallel relationship. Most were unwilling to discuss contraception.

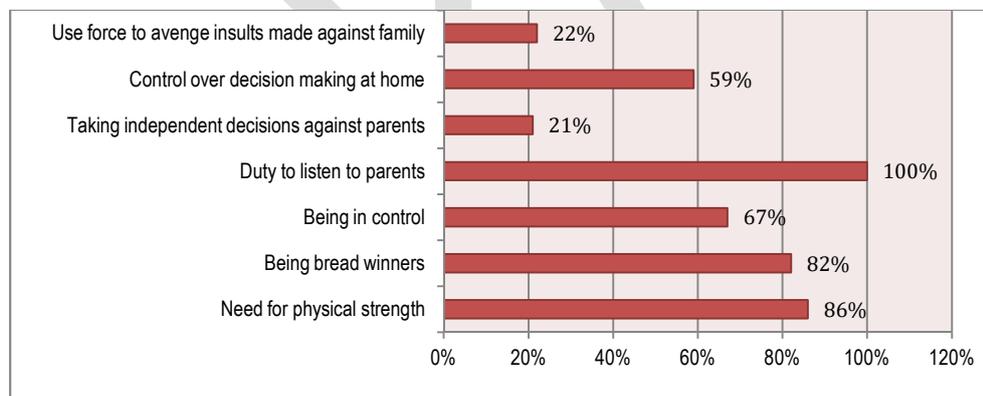
Most of the young grooms did not want to have more than two children, and some were aware of the vasectomy option. However, few of the respondents were open to that form of birth control because they felt it hurt their masculinity (figures 32 and 33).

Figure 33 Young grooms' responses about children and contraception



On being asked whether physical strength is an important attribute of men, a majority of the young grooms strongly agreed. More than half of them believed that men must always be in control and that men should have the final word in all decisions at home. Honor of family was an important concept among the young grooms, and some felt that they needed to use force to respond to insults made against their family. The young grooms were unanimous about their duty to listen to their mother and father. Only a small number of respondents felt that they could take independent decisions, even if it was against the wishes of their parents and the community (figure 34).

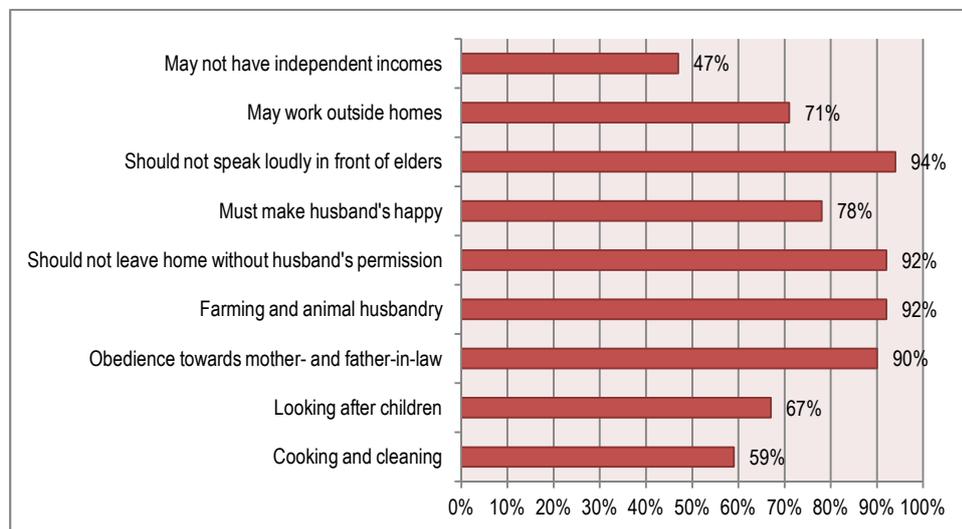
Figure 34 Young grooms' ideas of masculinity



When asked about women's roles in the family, more than half of the young grooms emphasized domestic work, such as cooking, taking care of the home and looking after children. Most of the respondents agreed on the need for women to be obedient to their mother- and father-in-law. They also thought that women should do farming and cattle rearing work if required to do so by the marital family. Most of the respondents, at 94 percent, said that women should not speak loudly in front of the husband and family elders. Other gender stereotypes that were highlighted included the need for women to be sensitive, to make their husbands happy and to not leave home without the husband's permission. And 71 percent of the young grooms strongly felt that women should work outside the home, although nearly half of them said that women should not have independent income (figure 35).

Young grooms' views about women's roles, responsibilities and conduct toward their husbands and marital kin were rigidly conservative, reflecting the dominant conceptions of the gender-unequal society of rural Rajasthan. Despite being victims of child marriage themselves, the young grooms found it difficult to relinquish the "privileges" and claims on women associated with masculine roles and identities.

Figure 35 Young grooms' perceptions of the role of women



Exercising masculine authority and agency

Although the young grooms appear to be vulnerable to some extent and as dependent on their parental decisions as the young bride respondents in the study, on the issue of marriage, their responses suggested more agency shaped by the dominant norms of masculinity. In Morath village, for instance, several young men told the interviewers about their plans for a second marriage if their wife fails to please them. If the wife does not behave appropriately, show respect to them or their parents or even if they simply dislike her, they will consider ending the marriage. In another village, the interviewers spoke to a boy who was not willing to bring his wife home because "she is not beautiful". The boy's parents, who had arranged the marriage, were supportive of his decision.

Har Lal's story

Har Lal is 25 and has been married for 10 years. He studied until Class 7 in a government school and now works as a wage laborer. Over the years, he has worked hard but does not feel that he can do well because he has little education. He blames his family for pressuring him to marry when he was too young. He said growing differences with his wife led him to break away from the relationship this year. He said he was unable to "adjust" with her any longer.

Lalu's story

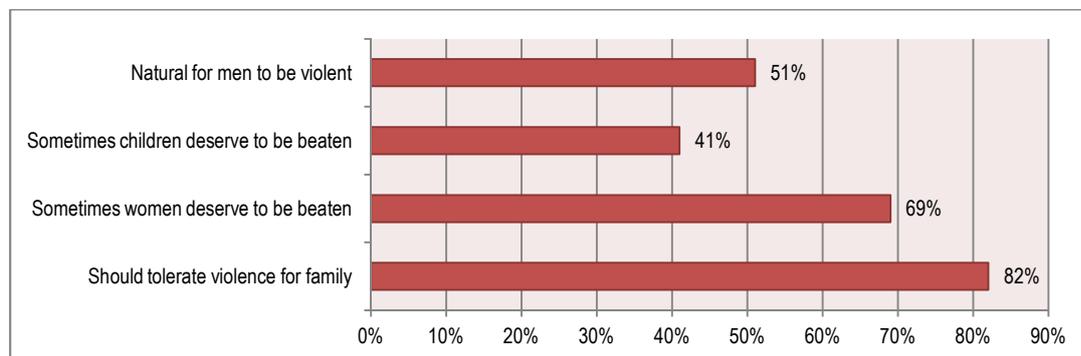
Lalu, 17, a Bhil boy, works as an ice cream vendor. He left his marriage this year also due to the absence of love and affection. He was married at the age of 13 and only completed primary school. He said he was too young to understand what marriage meant. Being certain that he "disliked" his wife, he requested that his parents arrange a second marriage for him.

Domestic violence not viewed as a problem

If the wives do not do their work, such as cook, look after the children and show appropriate respect to the in-laws, the young grooms said they are within their right to beat them. Older men listening to these conversations remarked that they taught their boys "to control women". In Changedi, the interviewers came across older men who believed that prevention of child

marriage was against their caste and custom. If girls and boys are not married early, they said, it would be difficult to control their conduct (figure 36).

Figure 36 Young grooms' perceptions of violence



Contradictory responses were given on gender equality questions. The responses suggest that while the young grooms were aware of progressive ideas, such as gender equality, and may have pragmatic viewpoints about the need for education, skills, employment and political participation for women, they also expressed traditional ideas about disciplining and controlling women, which implied continued acceptance and normalization of domestic violence.

Only a quarter of the respondents thought that women lacked skills to hold political positions, while nearly half of them did not mind if their wife was more educated than them. Almost all of them thought women should have employment-worthy skills. But slightly more than half of them said that women should not make decisions about money. While only half the young grooms said it was natural for men to be violent, a large majority felt that women should tolerate violence for the sake of the family. More than half of the respondents said that women deserve to be beaten when they make mistakes. Fewer than half of them professed that having a son was better than having a daughter, yet most of them said that they supported the idea of gender equality (figures 37 and 38).

Figure 37 Young grooms' perceptions of women's ability

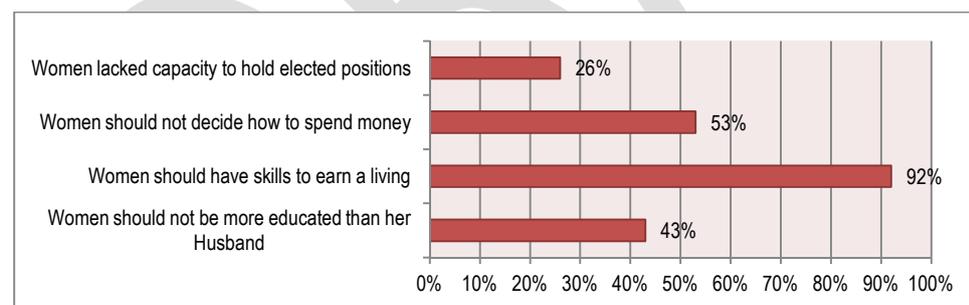
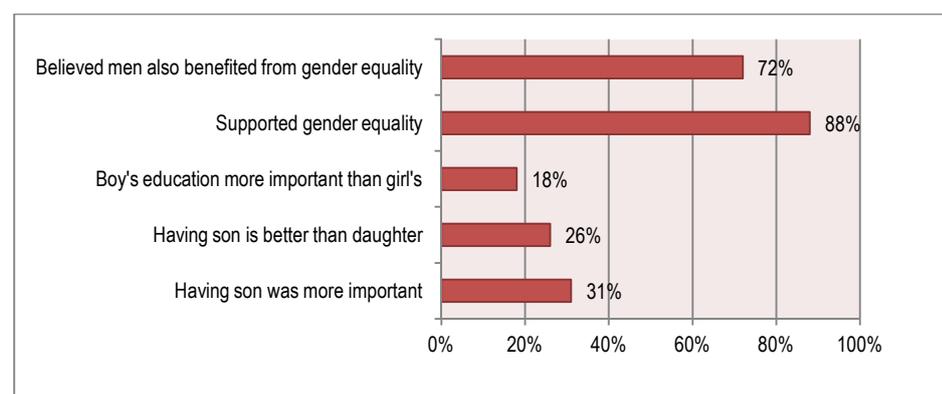


Figure 38 Young grooms' perceptions of gender equality



Ideas of masculinity based on men’s controlling behavior over women and gender-inequitable attitudes have been attributed to lower educational attainment, economic poverty and early socialization of men in the contexts in which son preference and other gender discriminatory norms are prevalent (Nanda et al., 2014). Strategies for working with young boys to provide alternative reference points that are more gender equitable would be essential toward supporting and reinforcing preventive child marriage interventions with young girls. Providing safe space for young girls and boys to interact would also be useful toward breaking down discriminatory societal stereotypes of each about the other.

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CONCLUSIONS

Child, early and forced marriages constitute violations of the human rights of girls and are pervasive forms of gender-based violence. They undermine equality and the empowerment of girls and women by reinforcing and perpetuating negative social norms and curtailing opportunities for girls, trapping an estimated 15 million Indian girls annually in a cycle of poverty, ill health and inequality. Rajasthan is a drought-prone state in the western region of India with a high prevalence of early marriage, supported by social and cultural practices. Every year, marriages are arranged for millions of children, often during important religious festivals by their parents.

Vikalp Sansthan has been working in rural Rajasthan since 2004. Their earlier work with youth revealed that young brides living in marital homes wanted to talk about their lives but were unable to do so out of fear of adverse repercussions, including violence. To create appropriate and accessible support systems as well as interventions, Vikalp initiated this three-year research project to deepen their understanding of young brides' experiences (specifically relating to physical, sexual and emotional violence) the ideas and attitudes of boys and young men toward violence and masculinity. This report presents the results of that project.

The objectives of the research presented in this report were to explore the experiences and perceptions of early marriage among young brides and young grooms and to understand the contextual factors, such as community beliefs, attitudes and practices, and other intersecting social and economic factors that support early marriage.

Based on the interviews for this study, the following conclusions were drawn about the experience of young brides and young grooms on the phenomenon of child, early and forced marriages in the areas under study in Udaipur District of Rajasthan.

Higher prevalence of early marriage among disadvantaged socioeconomic groups: The communities where the study was undertaken are rural and agriculture dependent. All the households owned some land. Half of the households were highly impoverished. While early marriage was present among all the selected households, the age at marriage of the young brides was particularly low among the Scheduled Tribe (Bhil) communities. Young brides were disadvantaged based on a number of parameters, including material deprivation, gender-based inequality and caste-based exclusion.

Birth order and early marriage risk: Birth order appears to be a risk factor for later-born girls who have older female siblings. That is, having several older sisters increases the lower-than-average age of marriage for some girls because natal households prefer to economize by arranging a single ceremony for several daughters.

Short engagements and attaining puberty: Many young brides started puberty after their marriage, although the age at marriage had increased when compared with the previous generation of brides. The length of engagement was short, and at least half the young brides had moved into the marital home by the time they were 16. Frequent visits to their marital home (while still living in their natal home) led to increased risk of early sexual activity that could be non-consensual or coercive.

Early initiation into sexual activity and conception: Early initiation to sexual activity leads to early conception, followed by childbirth. Many of the young brides were too young and overwhelmed to exercise any choice in decisions about sexual activity, pregnancy and childbirth. What would be considered statutory rape in another context is normalized under the guise of marriage.

Low educational attainment: Early marriage is linked to the low educational attainment of young brides. More than half of the young brides had married before they were 16, and most of them

reported marriage as the reason for dropping out of school. Other reasons cited by them were poverty, parental pressure and absence of a nearby school and thus safety concerns. The young brides were expected to stay at home and do housework, help their mothers, rear goats and do farm work in readiness for their responsibilities in the marital home.

Young brides articulate loss of freedom: Despite a sense of inevitability about marrying, most of the young brides experienced their marriage as a loss of freedom, restricted mobility and enforced domestic bondage. Most of them, however, were not able to articulate what freedom meant for them.

Need for female role models: The absence of formally educated or professional women as role models shaped the low aspiration for education. A small proportion of the young brides who insisted on continuing their education were motivated by their friends who were training for jobs (nursing and teaching) or had friends or relations working in female-specific jobs, such as *anganwadi* or ASHA workers. Family members, usually fathers, mothers and, in some cases, husbands also influenced the decision to continue with formal education or professional training. In communities that lacked such role models or supportive gatekeepers, girls were less keen on education and unable to articulate what they would like to be doing if they were not married.

Early child birth, decision-making and son preference: The age at which cohabitation occurs following the formalization of marriage was quite low. A majority of the young brides had at least one child at the time of the interview. Most girls were not physically or emotionally ready to bear children. Son preference shaped decisions to have more children, and nearly half of the respondents felt that they needed to have at least one male child. The young brides could not dispute decisions about repeated and frequent pregnancies because of pressure from the husband and in-laws.

Knowledge about menstruation and contraception: Shame, secrecy and taboos surrounding any discussion about menstruation, contraception and sexual health also meant that the young brides had proceeded relatively unprepared to their marital home.

Conception and contraception according to young grooms and brides: Most of the young grooms were unwilling to discuss contraception, although some of them said that it is the wife's responsibility to ensure that she does not get pregnant. However, according to the young brides, contraceptive use is considered an area reserved for male decision-making.

Fears of desertion, anxieties and oppressive marital homes: The responses of the young brides and older women (who were young brides once) suggest that fear and anxiety about performing the new roles expected of them, by strangers (their in-laws) in an unfamiliar place (the marital home) and the consequences of failing to meet their approval were inextricably linked to the experience of being married as children. As women grew older, they were consumed by anxieties and fears about their own daughters' futures.

Nata system, or second, informal marriage: The significance of *nata* in the study area indicates the precarious nature of the lives of girls and young women who have limited options available to them when their marriage breaks down within the context of the deeply embedded gender inequality of Rajasthan society. Most often, women cannot leave an oppressive marriage, but they can face desertion or discrimination when widowed due to lack of education, employment, income, unsupportive families and communities and ineffective laws. Being a young bride therefore determines the predictably oppressive path that women will take as they grow older, within or outside their marriage.

Conceptions of masculinity: Most of the young grooms expressed stereotypical attributes associated with rural masculinity, such as physical strength, the breadwinning role and control over wife and children. On being asked whether physical strength is an important attribute of men, a majority of the young grooms strongly agreed. More than half of them said that men must

always be in control, and more than half thought that men should have the final word in all decisions at home. Honor of family is an important concept among the young grooms. Some of them said they needed to use force to respond to insults made against their family.

Gender discriminatory attitudes among young grooms: Young grooms' views about women's roles, responsibilities and conduct toward their husband and marital kin were rigidly conservative, reflecting the dominant conceptions of the gender-unequal society of rural Rajasthan. Despite being victims of child marriage themselves, the young grooms found it difficult to relinquish the "privileges" and claims on women associated with masculine roles and identities.

Dissolution of marriage, economic insecurity and lack of decision-making: Many of the young brides were unable to escape oppressive conditions because they had little control over the elaborate money transactions and decision-making around exchanges that framed their marriage contract. While marriage provided only the illusion of security to the young brides, the dissolution of a marriage had a different set of adverse consequences for their life.

Masculine freedom and contracting multiple alliances: Some boys and men boasted about relationships with girls and women outside their marriage. Several spoke about their plans to find a second wife or continue an ongoing parallel relationship.

Normalization of domestic violence: Young grooms thought that women should not be involved in decisions about finances. Many thought it was natural for men to be violent, a large majority felt that women should tolerate violence for the sake of their family, and more than half said that women deserved to be beaten if they commit "mistakes" perceived as such by family members. Similarly, domestic violence was not viewed as a problem. If the wives did not do their work, such as cook, look after the children and show appropriate respect to the in-laws, the men were within their right to beat them. Older men listening to these conversations had remarked they taught their boys "to control women".

Labor burden and restricted mobility of young brides: The lives of young brides were characterized by hard labor in the marital home and farm and, in poorer communities, with the added burden of wage labor, especially among the poorer communities. Some 20 per cent of the interviewed young brides reported doing wage labor. While girls were socialized from a young age to perform endless chores uncomplainingly (along with attending school), their work increased significantly after they moved to their marital home. Following the engagement, the groom's family typically stepped up the pressure on the bride's family to send her to the marital home because the labor of the bride was deemed to have already transferred to her marital kin.

Young grooms' fears and anxieties about marriage: The young grooms reported less autonomy in decision-making about their own marriage. Thus, while being married early was a normal life cycle event for them, it was also accompanied by feelings of anxiety and fear before marriage and feelings of being burdened with responsibilities afterwards. Elder family members (parents) had a strong role here, and the young men felt that they could not make any decision against their parental wishes.

Young brides' fear and anxieties about marriage: The young brides were afraid of the physical relationship or "being alone" with their husband. Some said that they had little prior knowledge about sexual relationships and were afraid of what would happen to them. Many were afraid that they would not be able to fulfil expectations around housework or farm work. They were afraid of the consequences if the work done by them did not please their mother- or sister-in-law. Other fears ranged from living in a strange place to meeting new people and the inability to "please everyone". Some of the young brides recalled experiences of beatings that made them afraid.

The worst memory of married life: More than half of the young brides said that they did not want to marry. A large majority of them mentioned being upset or anxious about leaving their parents' home, and more than a quarter of them said leaving school was the worst part of marrying. A smaller number mentioned forced sexual intercourse, physical violence, verbal abuse, burden of housework, childbirth-related complications and monetary stress.

Health conditions of young brides: Many of the older women attributed diseases, illnesses and infant death to attacks by evil spirits, saying such things as "my child died because of the bad wind". Because the older women wielded considerable power and influence on the lives of the young brides, their experiences and views around conception, birth of children and health care need to change if young brides are to have better health outcomes. This is a relatively neglected area of intervention in the context of early marriage prevention.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

A sustained effort is required within the selected villages to ensure the empowerment of women and girls to work toward the delay in marriage and a perceptual shift toward understanding choice and agency. Greater effort will be required to transform gender-inequitable cultural norms and practices, values and attitudes within the patriarchal context.

Young girls not yet married or married but living in the natal home

- Encourage young brides to continue their education by re-enrolling in school or staying in school.
- Organize direct group-based interventions with girls to mobilize them for preventive work, that is to prevent early marriages or other violations from taking place. These girls are also sisters-in-law of the married women in their household, and they can help reduce the oppression of young brides.
- Provide training and awareness building sessions on health, sexuality, assertiveness, reproduction and contraception and control over one's body.
- Provide empowerment sessions with young brides on their rights and the laws on violence against women, with emphasis on accessing social welfare schemes for support and redress.
- Provide training on livelihood skills, including non-traditional livelihoods that are outside of gender norms, like photography and computer use.

Young married women

- Improve Vikalp's access to young women, through regular visits and dialogues within the households with the sisters-in-law and mothers-in-law, who are often gatekeepers to engaging with young brides.
- Organize direct group-based interventions with married women in the intervention areas for preventive work.
- Provide training and awareness building sessions on health, sexuality, assertiveness, reproduction, contraception and control over one's body.
- Provide empowerment sessions with young married women on their rights and the laws on violence against women, with emphasis on accessing government schemes and welfare programs for support and redress.
- Help women experiencing violence through interventions at the household level.
- Provide training on livelihood skills, including non-traditional livelihoods that are outside gender norms, like photography and computer use.

Older women

- Provide direct interventions with older women to expand their knowledge on violence against women, power hierarchies and patriarchy.
- Provide transformative leadership building among these women to encourage change in the overall community understanding of gender relations.

Young boys (married and unmarried)

- Provide direct group-based interventions with boys on ideas of masculinity, sexuality and violence against girls and women.
- Provide educational, livelihood and skills-based interventions that will help them assert their interest in delaying marriage.

Community-based interventions

- Improve access to alternate livelihoods, including use of the government's Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and Aaajevika rural livelihood programs for

households of the marginalized communities to reduce the daily drudgery among women and girls.

- Conduct campaigns on violence against women, and provide young brides with support to access government programs on health, education and livelihoods.
- Leverage elected representatives, police, health workers and school teachers for outreach programs by involving them as advocates on girls' rights.

Sensitizing community workers

- Sensitize community workers, such as *anganwadi* workers, who work closely in the community with young women and girls toward gender-equitable values and behaviors and away from mirroring societal prejudices around caste, gender and sexuality.

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This report represents a work in progress. Views that are expressed represent the opinion of the authors and not necessarily the position of the American Jewish World Service, Vikalp Sansthan or the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

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