

# Factors Associated with Decline in Child Marriage in India: Findings from a District-Level Analysis

Research Brief

January 2019

## Background

India has the largest number of child brides in the world. At the same time, recent data show notable progress in reducing child marriage. The 2011 Census reports that the proportion of 15–19-year-old girls who were ever married declined from 25 percent to 20 percent and the proportion of women married before age 18 among those who got married in the five years prior to the census declined from 32 percent to 17 percent between 2001 and 2011 (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2001; 2011). The National Family Health Survey also shows that the proportion of 20–24-year-old women who were married before age 18 declined from 47 percent to 27 percent between 2005–06 and 2015–16 (IIPS and Macro International, 2007; IIPS and ICF, 2017). There are also huge inter- and intra-state variations in the prevalence of child marriage in India. With eight percent and 42 percent of 20–24-year-old women married before age 18, Kerala and Bihar recorded the lowest and highest prevalence of child marriage, respectively, among the states of India in 2015–16. Similarly, district level prevalence ranged from zero percent in Ernakulam, Kerala to 68 percent in Shrawasti, Uttar Pradesh.

A better understanding of the factors that might have contributed to the decline in child marriage in the recent past could provide useful programmatic leads to hasten the process of preventing child marriage in India. Most studies on drivers of child marriage in India have focused on exploring the association between child marriage and individual level characteristics. Only a few studies have explored the influence of macro level factors on the prevalence of child marriage (Desai and Andrist, 2010; Dommaraju, 2009; Srinivasan et al., 2015).

Drawing on district-level data from national censuses conducted in 2001 and 2011 and other data sets, this research brief describes the temporal and spatial variation in the prevalence of child marriage and extends the limited evidence on the role of macro level factors in the recent decline in child marriage in India.

## Key Findings

The prevalence of child marriage, as measured by the percentage of women married before age 18 among those who had married in the five years preceding the census, declined by half between 2001 and 2011 in India.

Eight states—Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh—recorded decline in child marriage in the range of two-fifths to almost three-fifths.

One-sixth of districts recorded decline in child marriage by a quarter to two-fifths.

Most of the decline in child marriage between 2001 and 2011 was explained by improvements in female education, reduction in poverty and average household size.

## The study

Our analysis drew primarily on district level data from Indian censuses of 2001 and 2011. We created a panel data set linking 2001 and 2011 districts. There were 593 districts in the 2001 census and this number increased to 640 districts in 2011 census. We used 2001 districts as the base. For districts partitioned between 2001 and 2011, we compared district boundaries across 2001 and 2011 censuses using the 2011 District Census Handbook. We calculated the 2011 values of the outcome and explanatory variables by taking the weighted average of bifurcated districts, using the 2001 population of the bifurcated parts as weights<sup>1</sup>. The panel dataset thus created has data for 593 districts. We also used district level data from the National Crimes Records Bureau (NCRB) of the Ministry of Home Affairs for the year 2001 and 2011 (National Crimes Records Bureau, 2017) and regional estimates of poverty and inequality (Chauhan et al., 2016).

<sup>1</sup>This methodology is used previously by several researchers, see for example, Dommaraju, 2009; Murthi, Srinivasan and Subramanian, 2001.



We used the percentage of women who were married before 18 years of age among those who got married in the five years prior to the census to measure the prevalence of child marriage in the district<sup>2</sup>. We used the fixed effects model for panel data to identify the association between the prevalence of early marriage and explanatory variables<sup>3</sup>. The explanatory variables included in the regression analysis were female education, female labour force participation, household size, female-headed households, marriage squeeze, urbanisation, economic progress as measured by village electrification and the poverty head-count ratio, and atrocities against women and girls (see Table 1 for 2001 and 2011 levels of these indicators). We recognise that changing norms about marriage is likely to be an important factor; however, we cannot capture its effect because of the absence of data. We applied regression-based decomposition method to estimate the contribution of the explanatory variables to the decline in the prevalence of child marriage between 2001 and 2011.

### District-wise temporal variation in the prevalence of child marriage

The pace of decline in child marriage between 2001 and 2011 varied across states and districts. The prevalence of child marriage declined by two percentage points in Goa to 30 percentage points in Bihar. Notable declines were observed in eight states—Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh—wherein child marriage declined by two-fifths to almost three-fifths, from 31–53 percent in 2001 to 15–32 percent in 2011.

National and state averages mask considerable differences across districts within states. At one extreme, one in six districts recorded no noticeable decline<sup>4</sup> in child marriage between 2001 and 2011 (100 districts). As expected, these districts were predominantly from such low prevalent<sup>5</sup> states as Himachal Pradesh (9)<sup>#</sup>, Kerala (8)<sup>#</sup>, and Punjab (10)<sup>#</sup>, and states with medium level of prevalence—Gujarat (14)<sup>#</sup>, Maharashtra (7)<sup>#</sup>, Manipur (7)<sup>#</sup>, Meghalaya (5)<sup>#</sup>, Mizoram (7)<sup>#</sup> and Tamil Nadu (7)<sup>#</sup>. At the other extreme, another one in six districts recorded declines in the range of 25 to 41 percentage points (104 districts); these districts were largely from such high prevalent states as Andhra Pradesh (7)<sup>#</sup>, Bihar (33)<sup>#</sup>,

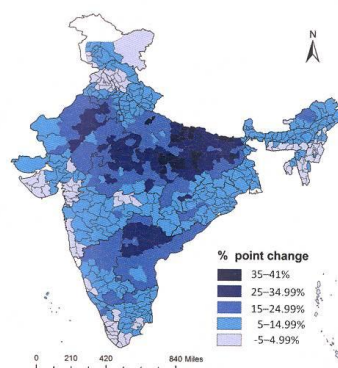
Jharkhand (6)<sup>#</sup>, Madhya Pradesh (20)<sup>#</sup>, Rajasthan (7)<sup>#</sup> and Uttar Pradesh (27)<sup>#</sup>.

Table 1: The situation in 2001 and 2011

Indicators	2001	2011
% women married before age 18 among those who got married in the five years preceding the census <sup>1</sup>	29.9	15.7
% 15–24-year-old women who had completed 8 years or more of schooling <sup>1</sup>	41.7	58.8
% 15–24-year-old women engaged in economic activities <sup>1</sup>	34.3	28.3
Average household size <sup>1</sup>	5.4	5.0
% female-headed households <sup>1</sup>	10.4	11.2
Marriage squeeze (ratio of 20–24-year-old unmarried men to 15–19-year-old unmarried women (per 1,000)	836.7	873.4
% urban <sup>1</sup>	23.7	27.2
% villages electrified <sup>1</sup>	81.0	90.6
Poverty head-count ratio <sup>2</sup>	37.5	23.9
Number of crimes against women per 100,000 females <sup>3</sup>	26.5	35.0

Sources: <sup>1</sup> Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2001; 2011; <sup>2</sup> Chauhan et al., 2016; <sup>3</sup> National Crimes Records Bureau, 2017

Map 1: Temporal variation in the pace of decline in child marriage between 2001 and 2011 by districts



<sup>2</sup> The percentage of 20-24-year-old women married before age 18, although a more rigorous and universally accepted measure of child marriage, cannot be measured from the census data.

<sup>3</sup> All these indicators were measured at the district level.

<sup>4</sup> Percentage point difference in the range of +/- 5 between 2001 and 2011 censuses.

<sup>5</sup> Prevalence of 10% or fewer women married before age 18 among those who got married in the five years preceding the census is considered as low prevalence, 11–25% as medium level of prevalence and more than 25% as high prevalence for the analysis presented in this brief; the prevalence data from 2001 are used for this categorization.

<sup>#</sup> Values in the parentheses refer to number of districts.

## Factors contributing to decline in child marriage

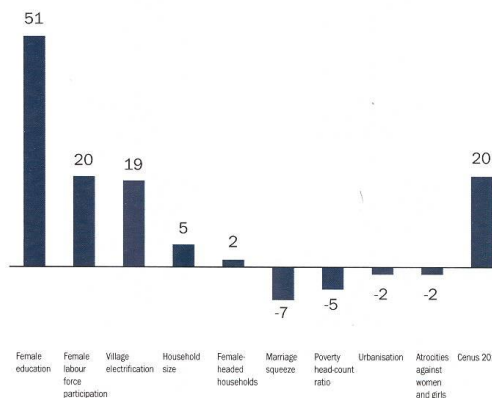
The regression results show that female education and economic development, as measured by village electrification, were inversely associated with the district-level prevalence of child marriage (Table 2). On the other hand, household size, female-headed households, marriage squeeze, and poverty were directly correlated with prevalence of child marriage.

**Table 2: Factors associated with the prevalence of child marriage**

Indicators	Beta coefficient
% 15–24-year-old women who had completed 8 years or more of schooling	-0.42***
% females engaged in economic activities	0.05
Average household size	5.78***
% female-headed households	0.86***
Marriage squeeze (ratio of 20–24-year-old unmarried men to 15-19-year-old unmarried women per 1,000)	0.03***
% urban	0.09
% villages electrified	-0.07**
Poverty head-count ratio	0.21***
Number of crimes against women and girls per 100,000 females	0.03
Time effect	-2.83*

Results from the regression-based decomposition exercise show that improvements in female education made the largest contribution in reducing child marriage between 2001 and 2011 (51% of the decline; Figure 1). Reduction in poverty and household size made the second largest contribution, reducing the prevalence of child marriage by 20 percent and 19 percent, respectively. In contrast, factors such as the narrowing of the marriage squeeze, increase in female-headed households, urbanisation and the increase in reported atrocities against women and girls resulted in increasing the child marriage, although marginally.

**Figure 1: Factors contributing to the decline in child marriage: The regression-based decomposition results**



## Recommendations

- The important contribution of improvements in educational attainment to delaying marriage highlights that the pace of change in delaying marriage may be accelerated by greater and more diversified investments in education. Many models exist, for example, conditional and unconditional cash transfer programmes, remedial education programmes, teacher incentive programmes and information and communication technology (ICT) based instruction to encourage school completion and improve learning outcomes. Investments are required to adapt, re-evaluate, and upscale some of these models, and to target the most marginalised.
- Findings also emphasise that child marriage prevention activities must focus on districts characterised by high levels of poverty and large household size.
- Findings that atrocities against women and girls have marginally increased child marriage suggest that child marriage prevention programmes must pay attention to preventing crimes against women and girls and alleviating women's and girls' concerns about lack of safety in their communities.

## Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the American Jewish World Service for supporting this study. In particular, the authors are grateful to Dr. Manjima Bhattacharjya for her support and guidance throughout the course of this project. The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge insightful comments that Dr. Shireen J. Jejeebhoy made on earlier versions of this brief; and Ms. Komal Saxena for help in the design and production of this brief.



## References

1. Chauhan R. K, S. K. Mohanty, S. V. Subramanian et al. 2016. "Regional Estimates of Poverty and Inequality in India, 1993–2012", *Social Indicators Research*, 127 (3): 1249–1296.
2. Desai, Sonalde and Lester Andrist. 2010. "Gender Scripts and Age at Marriage in India", *Demography*, 47(3):667–687.
3. Dommaraju, P. 2009. "Female Schooling and Marriage Change in India", *Population-E*, 64 (4): 667–684.
4. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015–16: India*. Mumbai: IIPS.
5. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and Macro International. 2007. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), 2005–06: India*, Volume I. Mumbai: IIPS.
6. Murthi, M., P. V. Srinivasan and S. V. Subramanian. 2001. "Linking Indian Census with National Sample Survey", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 36(9).
7. National Crimes Records Bureau. 2017. *District-wise crimes committed against Women during 2001-2012*. Accessed on 11 January, 2019 at <https://data.gov.in/resources/district-wise-crimes-committed-against-women-during-2001-2012>. Open Government Data (OGD) Platform India: Government of India.
8. Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner. 2001. *C-4 ever married and currently married population by age at marriage and duration of marriage, India*. Accessed on 11 January, 2019 at <http://censusindia.gov.in/DigitalLibrary/MFTableSeries.aspx>. New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India.
9. Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner. 2011. *C-4 ever married and currently married population by age at marriage and duration of marriage, India*. Accessed on 11 January, 2019 at <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-series/c-4.html>. New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India.
10. Srinivasan, P., K. Nizamuddin, R. Verma et al. 2015. *District-level study on child marriage in India: What do we know about the prevalence, trends and patterns?*. New Delhi, India: International Center for Research on Women.

The Population Council conducts research and delivers solutions that improve lives around the world. Big ideas supported by evidence: It's our model for global change. [popcouncil.org](http://popcouncil.org)

## Suggested Citation

Zavier, A. J. F., S. Basu and K. G. Santhya. 2019. *Factors associated with decline in child marriage in India: Findings from a district-level analysis*, *Research Brief*. New Delhi: Population Council.

Population Council  
Zone 5A, Ground Floor  
India Habitat Centre, Lodi Road  
New Delhi, India 110 003  
Phone: 91-11-24642901  
Email: [info.india@popcouncil.org](mailto:info.india@popcouncil.org)  
Website: [www.popcouncil.org](http://www.popcouncil.org)

© 2019. The Population Council, Inc.



# Perceptions of Young Adolescent Girls on Marriage

Research Brief

January 2019

## Background

In India, according to the 2011 census, three percent and two percent of girls and boys in ages 10–14, respectively, were already married (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, n.d.). In absolute numbers, this translates into almost two million girls and one million boys in ages 10–14 who were married. In fact, the proportion of ever married girls in ages 10–14 was as high as one in five or more in 24 districts and one in ten in three districts in India. The 2015–16 National Family Health Survey shows that as many as three percent of 15–19-year-old girls and seven percent of 20–24-year-old women were married before age 15 (IIPS and ICF, 2017a). Although child marriage in India has been extensively studied, the perspectives of young adolescents (10–14-year-olds) have rarely been explored in these studies. Most of the existing studies have focused on describing the magnitude, trends, and consequences of child marriage, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from those aged 15 and above.

This research brief seeks to fill this gap and describes young adolescent girls' preferences regarding timing of marriage and their perspectives about premarital preparedness and transformations that take place with marriage transition. Findings presented in this brief drew on focus group discussions (FGDs) with photo elicitation<sup>1</sup> with girls in ages 10–14 conducted as part of a multi-component study on what works to reduce child marriage in India.

## The study

We conducted a multi-component exploratory study in two districts—Bundi and Chittaurgarh—in the state of Rajasthan. We located the study in Rajasthan, as it

## Key Findings

The study participants, although so young (half of the participants were 10–12-year-olds), displayed an adult insight into the institution of marriage and the socially constructed meanings of marriage.

Yet, they do not passively embody these social messages; they recognise the constraining effect of marriage, particularly child marriage, and prefer to delay marriage.

Across all FGDs, girls provided a consistent and clear set of reasons that girls cited for delaying marriage—completing an education, getting a job, becoming self-reliant, and adhering to the law in particular. They also proposed a range of strategies that girls should adopt for resisting child marriage—reasoning with parents, seeking support from friends, teachers, influential adults to lodging a complaint with the police, for example, indicating that their desire to get married at a later age is likely very real and they have thought in depth about why they want to delay marriage and what they will do if they are asked to marry early.

Parents' control over the timing of marriage and choice of the groom-to-be and their disregard for their daughters' preferences in the marriage arrangement process persist and can deter many girls from realising their aspirations for a delayed marriage.

Pre-marriage socialisation of girls tends to reinforce entrenched gender inequities and traditional values and norms, which may partly explain the post-marriage vulnerabilities experienced by girls.

Even young adolescents recognise the numerous changes in a girl's life that marriage entails and the challenges faced by married girls when co-residing with the marital family and the assumption of new roles and enhanced responsibilities, as well as changes in feminine identity, for example, appropriate attire, loss of agency, school discontinuation, and changes in their previously intimate relationship between them and their natal family and the community in which they grew up.

<sup>1</sup> Photo elicitation, which involves the use of photographs to encourage a response, has been shown to be of particular value when working with children and young people (Institute for Reproductive Health, 2011). In our study, we showed the FGD participants a series of pictures of a child marriage ceremony, children going to school, and children engaged in household chores and work outside home to encourage the discussion.



is among the top ten states in terms of the prevalence of child marriage; the 2015–16 National Family Health Survey reports that as many as 35 percent of women in ages 20–24 were married before age 18 (IIPS and ICF, 2017b). An analysis of 2001 and 2011 census data shows that decline in child marriage during the intercensal period varied across districts even among those that recorded similar levels in 2001. We located our study in two districts from among districts with similar socio-demographic characteristics, where in one the prevalence of child marriage declined at a faster pace (Bundi) and in the other it declined at a slower pace (Chittaurgarh) than the state average.

The study comprised: (1) FGDs with photo elicitation with young girls in ages 10–14; (2) a survey of unmarried and married girls in ages 15–19; (3) a survey of parents/parents-in-law of girls in ages 15–19; (4) key informant interviews (KIIs) with influential adults in the community (teachers, frontline health workers, village-level elected representatives and religious and caste leaders); and (5) in-depth interviews (IDIs) with officials from such government departments as Education, Women and Child Development, Health, Social Justice, and Law Enforcement (police and judiciary), and representatives of non-governmental organisations.

A total of six FGDs were conducted with girls in ages 10–14 in six villages—three each from the two districts. These villages were selected from among the 48 villages from the two districts that were selected for the survey of girls in ages 15–19. The FGDs focused on exploring young adolescent girls' perspectives about the institution of marriage, premarital socialisation, transformations that take place with marriage, girls' preferences regarding timing of marriage, and actions that girls can take to resist child marriage. A total of 56 girls participated in the FGDs, with nine girls on average in each FGD. Of these, 26 girls were in ages 10–12 and 30 girls were in ages 13–14. All girls except two were enrolled in school at the time of the study; 13 girls had completed Classes 4–5 and the remaining 43 girls had completed Classes 6–8. Almost all girls (48 girls) reported that they were not currently engaged in any work. Most of the girls belonged to other backward castes (30 girls), and girls who belonged to scheduled castes followed next in number (17 girls); the

remaining girls belonged to general castes (4 girls) and scheduled tribes (5 girls). Almost all girls were unmarried (50 girls) and the remaining were either engaged to be married (2 girls) or were married, but were not yet cohabiting with their husband.

### Preferences regarding marriage timing

The study participants observed that most girls who were like them prefer to marry at 18 years of age or later. Some reported that girls prefer to marry when they are 24–25 years old and when they have completed their studies. Girls narrated a range of reasons, including developmental, health and legal reasons for preferring to delay marriage.

One reason that came up across all FGDs was the constraints that marriage can impose on girls' pursuit of schooling. Girls noted that if they continue their studies, they can get a job, better their living conditions, become self-reliant, and bring fame to their parents, while marriage before completing their studies meant forgoing these opportunities and dreams. They further noted that girls will not be able to continue their studies because they would have to take care of household chores in their marital home and may get pregnant and face health risks associated with early childbearing.

R1-We want to complete our studies and then marry.

R-(All speak together) After completing studies.

R9-We will get a job after completing our education.

R8-We will get a job.

R2-Our life would be better.

R3-We will brighten our parents' name [District C, Village G]

I-So you girls do not want to get married when you are minors. What is the reason?

R2-This is because we cannot complete our studies after going to the in-laws' house...because we would have to do household chores, then the babies would be born so our body also gets damaged.

R3-Our studies get discontinued and we cannot move ahead in future.

R4-Our dream will not come true.

R6-If we became something after studying, we can stand on our own feet and we can do anything. We won't even need help of others. [District B, Village P]

Participants also noted that minor girls are not 'capable of taking care of themselves' let alone take on the roles of a daughter-in-law, wife, and mother.

Yet another reason against early marriage that participants across the FGDs cited indicated their awareness of the Child Marriage Prohibition Act. They noted that marriage at young ages is illegal and that 'it is a rule/law to marry at 18 or later'. They also reported that 'police can arrest those involved in child marriage'.

Girls in our study not only shared the reasons why they and other girls like them in their villages preferred a delayed marriage, but also narrated strategies that they can adopt if parents and elders insisted on marriages at young ages. These included simply 'conveying to parents and/or potential groom's family that they refuse to marry' and convincing parents about the importance of letting them complete their studies before getting married, their inability to manage the roles and responsibilities that marriage entails, and the illegality of marriage as minors.

R2-They try to tell their parents that they won't marry.

R5-They tell their parents that we will marry after growing up and being educated.

R3-They tell their parents that it is a legal offence. [District C, Village C]

Potential strategies that the participants proposed also included seeking support from friends, elders in own family and in the community, teachers, and frontline workers, like anganwadi workers, so that they can reason parents and intervene to prevent marriages of minors. Taking advantage of the provisions of the Child Marriage Prohibition Act, girls also suggested that 'they could go to the police and lodge a complaint'.

Most tragically, participants in two FGDs reported that girls could take such extreme actions as making efforts to 'commit suicide' and 'running away' from home to escape marriages at young ages.

Despite this strong aversion to marriage at a young age that study participants reported about most girls in their

communities, some noted that girls, particularly very young girls, do enjoy entering into marriage because 'they get a lot of money, they can ride a horse when they are taken out for *Bindauri* (marriage procession), they get a lot of dresses, an album of their photos would be made' and because they 'get excellent food to eat and new jewellery, both gold and silver jewellery, in their in-laws' house'. They elaborated that parents entice young girls with offers of sweets and new dresses at the time of marriage and that girls who want to marry young are misled by these ideas about the wedding itself (food, clothes, money, jewellery) without any information on what marriage actually entails.

### Perceptions about pre-marriage socialisation and marriage preparedness

Girls reported that young brides do not have any idea about their marriage; they are just told they will go to their in-laws' home. Some are told they will go there to play, and some of the rituals, for example, making the groom and bride open the *kakandor*<sup>2</sup> and play the 'ring game'<sup>3</sup>, may make the young brides believe what their parents are telling them.

R3-Some girls are so young that they do not even know what marriage is.

R8-They (parents/elders) tell her that it is a game. It is only a game for her when she does not understand what marriage is. [District B, Village P]

And many found out that they are going to get married only when parents brought home clothes and jewellery that they are to wear on their wedding day or asked them to go with them to buy those goods, or when they overheard parental discussion about their marriage—'parents talk to each other, and she gets to know then that her marriage is taking place'.

Girls reported that young brides are advised 'not to tell anyone about their impending marriage'; sometimes, they were 'not even allowed to go to anyone's house or to school till the marriage had taken place'. Minor girls were also advised to misreport their age:

<sup>2</sup> A game in which the groom and bride are asked to undo for each other the knot on the thread tied round their wrists; while the groom is allowed to use only one hand to open the thread knot, the bride is allowed to use both hands.

<sup>3</sup> Ring game takes place at the groom's home when the couple arrives. They are given a bowl or plate filled with water coloured with vermilion and turmeric into which a ring and a couple of sea-shells are placed. They are then asked to find the ring using one hand. The family and community members gather around and sing traditional ritual songs during this game. Whoever finds the ring first is declared the winner and the other person is asked to obey the winner for the next seven births.



I-What are girls told at the time of their marriage or before marriage?

R2-If they do a young girl's marriage, they tell her that she should tell others that she is older than she really is and not her real [lower] age. [District B, Village KW]

Girls emphasised that young girls were never asked whether they approved of or liked the groom. In just one FGD did girls agree that young girls were consulted about their preferences.

However, participants across all FGDs reported that girls were advised about the dos and don'ts of how to behave in their marital home. They suggested that girls were reminded constantly about how they should behave with their in-laws, husband, and others. Submissiveness was emphasised, and girls were instructed to 'keep their in-laws happy', 'obey their husband and in-laws', 'not to speak much in front of their husband and elders in the family', and 'to touch the feet of everyone'. Moreover, girls were expected to 'not pick fights with anyone in the marital home' and 'not return to the natal home after fighting with marital family members'. They were expected to display lady-like demeanour and be shy and quiet. They were advised 'to take care of all the responsibilities—doing household chores and doing unpaid work in the family farm—in their in-laws' house', and 'to take care of all at the marital home'. They were advised that 'they should wake up early in the morning in their in-law's place'. Girls were told what they should wear and what they should not, for example, covering their head in the marital home as a sign of respect to their in-laws.

### **Transformations that come with marriage for girls**

The study participants narrated a number of transformations that marriage entails for girls like them, as described below.

#### ***Union formation***

Girls in all FGDs agreed that marriage marks the union between a male and a female and is a union that is binding forever and extends beyond one's life. Girls commented

that with marriage 'the girl will live with her husband', 'she gets bound in a bond and has to spend the rest of her life with her husband'. They further elaborated that 'marriage rounds<sup>4</sup> happen so that the couple lives together for the rest of their lives and live together for seven births' and 'they both get tied in a knot and they both become husband and wife'.

### **Alliance between two families and new living arrangement**

Likewise, girls in all FGDs suggested that marriage is an alliance between two families, and this means that girls 'get a new family and have to manage two families after marriage—their parents' and their in-laws' family—and thus they 'brighten two families'. They described the new living arrangement thus—'She goes to someone else's house', that is, 'a girl is sent to her in-laws' place'. They also recognised the break from co-residence with their natal family, since 'girls cannot live with their parents for their entire life'.

Girls described the process of transition to co-residence with the marital family as smooth for some and abrupt and without preparation for others. They noted that families sometimes tried to smoothen this transition by sending girls to the marital family for short duration stays (a day to a month) off and on and in the company of other girls from the natal family:

R1-Her farewell takes place, and the girl goes with her husband.

R3-Yes, she is sent, one other girl is also sent along with her.

I-Who goes along with the bride when her farewell happens?

R2-Aunt's daughter, uncle's daughter and I had also gone there like when my sister got married.

I-What else happens?

R4-And she is brought back from her in-laws' house a few days later and she remains in her natal home for a month or 15 days and then she is sent back to her in-laws' house again and it keeps happening like this for some time. [District C, Village O]

<sup>4</sup> A ritual in which the couple walks seven rounds around the sacred fire and takes seven sacred vows which both the bride and groom must follow for the entire life.



For some others, the transition is completed over just two visits—'She stays at her in-laws' place for 1–2 days immediately after her wedding and then she is sent there when she is grown up.' In such cases, the second and the permanent transition may take place after completing her studies, 1–2 years or 3–4 years following marriage, or after a girl is considered grown-up, which could be after she turns 15–16 years or 18–19 years. The girls observed that parents sometimes negotiate with their in-laws to let the girl stay with her natal family for some time. Thus, as one of the participants noted, 'If a girl's marriage takes place at a minor age and if she does not want to go to her in-laws house immediately, she talks to her family and then her family talks to her in-laws to let her stay with them for some time'. Finally, girls reported that for some girls, co-residence with the marital family takes place immediately after marriage, particularly if the girl is not studying, and because of demands for her labour, as this observation suggests: 'Some are sent to their in-laws' house on the same day of their wedding because they [in-laws] say that we have to harvest maize and we have lots of household chores in our home'.

Even though there is typically a delay between marriage and cohabitation in child marriages, girls' narratives across all FGDs show that considerable interactions do take place between husband and wife before the girl settles permanently in her marital home. Girls reported that husband and wife meet during festivals, marriages and other functions in either family, and school vacations. Girls also told us that young men visit their wife at their home often—'he comes to meet her after every 1–2 months'—or they go out to spend time together ('when they go somewhere for a meal together' and 'they meet when they go to roam around'). Such interactions can take place at the initiative of girls also and sometimes surreptitiously too as one of the participants noted: 'She calls him to meet when no one is in her house'. With increased access to mobile phones, these interactions take place over the phone too—'they also talk to each other on the phone' and 'her husband has also sent her a small mobile phone so she talks to him over the phone'.

#### ***Assumption of new roles and enhanced responsibilities***

FGD participants recognised that marriage heralds the assumption of new roles and responsibilities for girls. Most importantly, they noted that marriage means

procreation and the continuation of the family: 'How will there be a next generation if girls continue to live with their parents?' Girls in all the FGDs reported that marriage means motherhood—'she goes to her in-laws' house, and she becomes the mother of her children'.

Beyond reproduction, marriage signified huge work expectations—doing household chores as well as unpaid work in the family farm—for these girls. Girls in couple of FGDs noted that girls like them were not asked to household chores before marriage, but they were required to take care of household chores in their marital home—'she is not made to do household chores before marriage' and 'she is asked to do work only when she goes to in-laws house'. Others noted that although adolescent girls were expected to do household chores even in their natal home, they were expected to do a lot more in their marital home. They were also expected to work in the family farm.

I-What else happens after marriage?

R1-She has to do household chores in their in-laws' house.

R2-She does not do household chores so much when she lives in her parents' house but there is lot of work after going there and she has to do all that.

R4-She does farming. [District B, Village K]

#### ***Changes in feminine identity***

Marriage entailed noticeable changes in feminine identity. Girls' narratives show that what is considered appropriate clothing for girls in the post-puberty stage is no longer considered appropriate once they are married, as seen in the comment of a participant: 'First, she wears a suit and then she starts wearing sari after getting married'. Moreover, married girls are expected not to wear 'transparent/revealing/fashionable clothes, or a suit without covering her head [a veil]'. Instead, they are expected to wear a sari, vermilion, bangles, toe-rings, and so on. Furthermore, covering the head [veiling] becomes part of girls' routine attire once married. Girls who violate these norms are scolded by family members and neighbours. They are also expected to display lady-like demeanour including shyness and speak as little as possible—'And she is not allowed to speak much there and she has to live with shyness'.

R1-Now, you have to live with your husband and you have to cover your face with a veil there. You cannot wear such transparent clothes there; I mean thin dress and you can't try to copy others' dress style, you do not wear your suit without a veil, people will tell you that now you got married, so all these things do not suit you.

R2-You wear sari there. [District C, Village O]

R-Some do not go to study because they have to wear sari and *sindoor* [vermilion].

R-If she wears suit after marriage, they scold her and tell her that now you wear sari because you have grown up and if you out, you should only wear a sari.

[District C, Village C]

### **Loss of agency**

Marriage imposed a lot of restrictions on girls' freedom to express themselves, freedom to interact with others, particularly with boys, and freedom of movement. Girls reported that married girls are expected to consult their husband and other family members in their home for doing anything—she gets restricted in all things and she is not allowed to do any work without consulting her husband and her in-laws' and 'she has to obey whatever her parents-in-law say to her'. Once married, girls were advised 'not to roam here and there' and 'not to go to other's house' and 'not to defame their in-laws', while their unmarried counterparts were not so restrained. They were also restrained from talking to anyone ('don't talk much to anyone') and in particular, with men or boys ('don't talk to boys').

### **School continuation and discontinuation**

Findings show two distinct patterns with regard to school continuation for girls following marriage. Girls across all FGDs reported that some girls, perhaps one-half, continued their studies even after getting married, while another half were required to discontinue their studies.

R3-Half of the parents send their daughters to school after marriage and half don't.

R2-Here is my oldest aunt, she has a younger daughter whose marriage was done when she used to study in class 10, and she still goes to school after getting married.

I-Up to which class do these girls continue their studies?

R-They study up to class 10 and 12, some are also

doing graduation, some also study from their in-laws' house, some do B.A. from their in-laws' house, some even become something too and they go from their in-laws' house to work. [District C, Village C]

The reasons offered for school discontinuation post-marriage varied. Girls suggested that some married girls discontinue because of their own lack of interest in continuing their studies—'only those girls continue to go to school who are interested in studies and who want to study'. The burden of household chores and demands on girls' labour can force some girls to discontinue their studies, as comments from several participants suggest—'she has to do household chores, and some go to the fields to work and that is why they don't go to school', and 'she also has to discontinue her studies if there is no one in her in-laws' house to do household chores'. FGD participants also suggested that opposition from parents or parents-in-law may prevent girls from continuing their studies post marriage. They reported that 'some in-laws say that now you are married so do not go to school anymore'. They also noted that parents-in-law may worry about any transgressions by girls when they go to school, as is evident from the report of a participant—'This is because who knows what she would do after going out, how would her parents-in-law know if she starts talking to other boys after going out'. School continuation after marriage is also observed to defy norms of seclusion and veiling—'some people practise the ritual of veiling and they do not consider it right for a married girl to go out like this'. Perceptions among marital family members that girls should not work after completing their studies may also act as a deterrent to school continuation among married girls; girls observed that 'they [in-laws] think what will she do after getting an education, she will be made to do household chores only' and that 'some [husbands] do not like their wife doing a job and that is why they want to make her do their household chores only'.

### **Changes in the attitudes and behaviours of natal family and community members toward married girls**

Girls in our study also discussed about changes that take place in attitudes and practices of natal family members and neighbours and community members once girls are married.



Perceptions were mixed. Some FGD participants reported that ‘they [family members/ neighbours and others in the village] behave in the same way with the girl as they used to before she got married’. However, many others reported changes in the attitudes and practices of families and communities once girls were married. Girls noted, for example, that ‘not all parents behave the same as they used to with their daughter when she was unmarried’; and ‘daughters are not loved as much after marriage, as she goes to her in-laws’ house, they forget her gradually, and they love their sons more’. During the transitional period between marriage and cohabitation, the natal family members may even taunt her if she does not learn to do household chores, saying, ‘You have not learnt how to cook yet, what will you do after going there? Your in-laws will say that we taught you nothing and that is why you do not know how to do this and how to do that’. They may even threaten her, saying, ‘If you do not know how to do household chores in your in-laws’ house, your in-laws will not keep you there, your husband will divorce you and send you back here to our house and we will not keep you’, ‘If you do not do household chores we will send you to your in-laws’ house right away’, or ‘You will humiliate us after going to your in-laws’ house’.

Likewise, girls noted that the neighbours and others in the village do not ‘give girls the same honour as they used to give her when she was unmarried, they consider her as someone else’s property’. These community members play a critical role in enforcing norms related to appropriate attire and behaviour for married girls, such as, telling the girls: ‘Don’t wear a suit but wear a long skirt when your in-laws come’ or ‘Now you should not roam around like this, don’t fight with anyone and don’t talk with boys’. They also tended to encourage parents to withdraw their daughters from school after marriage—‘they tell her family to discontinue her studies’.

## Recommendations

Several lessons can be drawn from the narratives of young adolescent girls who participated in the study that may inform programmes to prevent child marriage and address the seclusion and vulnerability that young brides may experience post-marriage. Most importantly, findings call for:

### Fostering meaningful consent and respecting girls’ desires and rights:

Findings underscore that it is important to work with parents to foster the idea of consent to marriage—a notion codified in international agreements as well as in Indian policies, that is, to encourage parents to solicit and respect their daughter’s views on the timing of marriage and choice of husband. This would entail working with both parents and their daughters to build awareness of human rights and to critically examine the social norms that do not allow girls or boys to have a say in the timing of marriage or choice of their spouse. People and institutions respected in the community as leaders can be trained and enlisted to speak out on this topic.

### Working with parents and communities to critically reflect and modify pre-marriage socialisation of girls:

Findings also call for working with parents and communities to foster critical reflection of the pre-marriage socialisation of girls that expect them to be submissive at their marital home, speak as little as possible, and not to stand up for their rights. It is important to create new and alternative narratives for post-marriage feminine and masculine roles.

## Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the American Jewish World Service for supporting this study. In particular, the author is grateful to Dr. Manjima Bhattacharjya for her support and guidance throughout the course of this project. The author is extremely grateful to Smt. Richa Khoda, Commissioner, Women Empowerment Department, Government of Rajasthan, Jaipur, for giving the permission to conduct this study in Bundi and Chittaurgarh districts of Rajasthan, India. The author would like to gratefully acknowledge insightful comments that Dr. Shireen J. Jejeebhoy made on earlier versions of this brief; Dr. Sudhir Varma for supporting us in conducting this study; Ms. Annu Kurien for her inputs in editing this brief; and Ms. Komal Saxena for help in the design and production of this brief.

## References

1. Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner. n.d. *C-2 Marital status by age and sex, India*. Accessed on 11 January, 2019 at <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-series/c-2/DDW-0000C-02-fer3-MDDS.xlsx>. New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner.
2. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017a. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India*. Mumbai: IIPS.
3. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF. 2017b. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: Rajasthan*. Mumbai: IIPS.
4. Institute for Reproductive Health. 2011. *Utilizing Participatory Data Collection Methods to Evaluate Programs for Very Young Adolescents: An Evaluation of Save the Children's Choices Curriculum in Siraha, Nepal*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The Population Council conducts research and delivers solutions that improve lives around the world. Big ideas supported by evidence: It's our model for global change. [popcouncil.org](http://popcouncil.org)

## Suggested Citation

Santhya, K. G. 2019. *Perceptions of young adolescent girls on marriage, Research Brief*. New Delhi: Population Council.

Population Council  
Zone 5A, Ground Floor  
India Habitat Centre, Lodi Road  
New Delhi, India 110 003  
Phone: 91-11-24642901  
Email: [info.india@popcouncil.org](mailto:info.india@popcouncil.org)  
Website: [www.popcouncil.org](http://www.popcouncil.org)