Young Lives

Factors Shaping Trajectories to Child and Early Marriage:

Evidence from Young Lives in India

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Summary

This mixed-method paper analyses longitudinal data related to the Older Cohort of girls in the Young Lives study in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to determine what factors shape the trajectories of girls aged 19 years into higher education or early marriage. Drawing upon individual-, household- and community-related data, the paper highlights that a multitude of factors, including location of residence, caste, socio-economic status, educational level and aspirations, parental education and social norms intersect to direct the trajectory of girls into child and early marriage or continued education.

The paper presents case studies of girls who continued their education after marriage and girls from economically and socially disadvantaged homes who won scholarships to achieve their dreams to highlight how girls are capable of achieving their aspirations if provided with an enabling family and policy environment. This includes access to secondary and higher education, a school education that builds young people's agency and aspirations, social protection for the poorest rural households to enable them to not withdraw young girls into paid work at an early age, and, most importantly, government-initiated programmes to challenge social and cultural norms such as the dowry system and the tendency to view girls as *paraya dhan* (belonging to someone else). Engaging with men and boys to challenge patriarchal norms and the discrimination faced by young girls is crucial if we are to change the marriage expectations of families and larger communities.

The authors

Renu Singh has over 25 years' experience in teaching, teacher education, education policy analysis and research, both in India and abroad. Trained as a Montessorian and special educator, her doctoral study was on the inclusion of marginalised children. Her special interests remain early childhood development, teacher education, school effectiveness, inclusion and gender. She has held a number of prestigious positions at NGOs, including Save the Children, and in university departments. She has also advised the Indian Government by serving in a variety of working groups, committees and boards. Currently she is the Country Director at Young Lives, India, and Visiting Professor at Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi.

Uma Vennam is a Professor of Social Work at Sri Padmavathi Women's University, Tirupati, India. She was trained at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and the University of East Anglia, UK. The focus of her research has been rural poverty, NGOs and rural development, and children in difficult situations (including trafficking). Uma is currently the Lead Qualitative Researcher for Young Lives, India, and the Rector of Sri Padmavathi Women's University.

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

Increasing global attention is being focused on curbing child and teen marriage, still an entrenched practice in many parts of the world. It is estimated that in 2011 nearly 70 million women between the ages of 20 and 24 had married before they turned 18 (Vogelstein 2013). While boys can also be the subject of child and early marriage, girls remain affected in much larger numbers. The UNFPA (2012) highlighted that despite near-universal commitment to end child marriage, one in three girls in developing countries (excluding China) would probably be married before they were 18, while one out of nine girls would be married before their 15th birthday. This would translate to 14.2 million girls getting married globally on an annual basis between now and 2021, with as many as 39,000 girls married each day.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989, the term 'child marriage', describes the legal or customary union between two people, of whom one or both spouses is below the age of 18. Child marriage persists in low- and middle-income countries, including in South Asia, where close to half (46 per cent) of girls and women report getting married before the age of 18 years (UNICEF 2014a). There has been a slow decline in child marriage globally in the last four decades, with its incidence decreasing from 41.2 per cent to 32.7 per cent (Harper et al. 2014). While the world's highest rates are seen in Niger (75 per cent) and Chad (72 per cent), the overall rate in South Asia (46 per cent) exceeds that of sub-Saharan Africa (37 per cent). Furthermore, while Bangladesh's rate (66 per cent) is much higher than India's (47 per cent), India has the largest population of child wives of any country in the world (UNFPA 2012). Despite legislation – the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, which prohibits child marriage, defined as the marriage of males below the age of 21 years, and females below 18 years – the most recent Indian Census (2011) reported that nearly 17 million children and young people between the ages of 10 and 19 – 6 per cent of the age group – were married, with girls constituting the majority (76 per cent). This is an increase of 0.9 million from the 2001 Census figure and masks even higher rates in some parts of the country: huge disparities exist in the prevalence of child marriage between urban and rural India as well as between and across states. Given that child marriage is illegal, these numbers may well be inaccurate and an underestimate of the prevalence of child and early marriage.[1] It is also important to highlight that early pregnancy is a corollary of early marriage – often with tragic consequences. Death rates among girls and young women giving birth before the age of 19 are double the level for females over 20 though they are five times higher for girls giving birth at the age of 15 or younger (Office of Gordon and Sarah Brown 2012). Besides their reproductive health and the well-being of their offspring being affected, girls discontinuing their education on account of getting married are likely to face greater challenges in entering the workforce and gaining financial independence. There is also evidence of child marriage being highly correlated with domestic and sexual violence, as girls who are married as children are more likely to be abused (Greene et al. 2015). In short, child marriage poses a major barrier to the empowerment of women and, by impeding the economic progress of the communities in which child wives live, perpetuates the cycle of poverty in which so many poor countries find themselves trapped (Lemmon and El Harake 2014).

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1 Given that girls cannot by law be married before 18 years, we use the terms child marriage and early marriage to capture children who are married by 19 years of age.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the cultural context of early marriage in India. Section 3 gives details of the data used for this paper. Section 4 provides the evidence from the quantitative and qualitative data, and Section 5 offers a conclusion, which contains policy recommendations.

2. India and the practice of child marriage

Sagade (2005) explores the history of child marriage in India and states that during the Vedic period, around 1500–600 BC, marriages were performed only when couples attained puberty. This, according to her, changed in the sixth and seventh centuries, when a patriarchal social structure emerged, encouraging early marriage for a girl, so that she would be married off preferably before puberty and certainly immediately after her first menstruation. Before independence, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 proclaimed the legal minimum age for marriage to be 15 for girls and 18 for boys. This law has seen a number of amendments since India gained independence: the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1978, raised the minimum age at marriage of girls from 15 to 18 years and for boys to 21 years, while the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 further strengthened the earlier legislation by prohibiting rather than merely restraining child marriage and included provision for declaring a marriage null and void and making offences under the Act cognisable and non-bailable. The most important clause (Section 16) directs the state governments to appoint Child Marriage Prohibition Officers to aid in the prevention of child marriages. The duties of these officers include taking any action necessary to prevent the solemnisation of child marriages, collecting evidence for the prosecution, raising the community's awareness of the risks and possible consequences of child marriages, moving for injunctive relief or a nullification on behalf of a child in a marriage contract, and assisting the Government in research and data-gathering regarding child marriage.

2.1 Declining trend in the marriage of children under 14

Despite India's commitment to try and combat the practice of child marriage, it continues to exist even after 68 years of independence. A recent quantitative analysis (Raj et al. 2012) of changes in the age for marriage in Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Pakistan reveals that between 1991 and 2007 significant relative reductions occurred in the marriage of girls under the age of 14 across all four nations. However there was no change in the incidence of marriage of girls aged 16–17 in any nation except Bangladesh – where marriages in this age group actually increased by nearly 35 per cent.

2.2 Cultural logic and causes of child marriage

Greene (2014) highlighted the inconsistent and poor quality of many of the data available on child, early and forced marriage, which is reflected in a limited understanding of the root causes of the practice, the expressions and effects of early marriage, and the intra- and inter-country differences in the practice. Variations in the religion, ethnicity, education and social class of child wives and their families have been identified as areas of necessary further research.

Various reasons have been suggested as factors contributing to child and early marriage in India. While familial characteristics such as poverty, lack of education, caste and size of family have been posited as factors associated with child marriage (UNICEF 2012; ICRW and Plan Asia Regional Office 2013; World Vision 2013), socio-political systems such as patriarchy and practices such as gender discrimination are seen as key reasons for its continuation. Discrimination against girls in decisions regarding education, employment, matters of sexuality and sexual behaviour, and other areas creates and perpetuates the conditions in which child marriages occur (UNICEF 2011).

2.1.1 Socio-cultural logic of child marriage

Parents in India also marry their daughters off early out of fear about their safety, and the worry stems from fear both of sexual assault and of girls choosing to begin sexual activity (ICRW and Plan Asia Regional Office 2013.) These findings echo similar ones from a study in South Asia by Raj (2010). The author noted that early marriage protects girls' marriageability, which can be destroyed by premarital sex, whether it occurs through sexual violence or through choice. There are marked pressures towards marriage at an early age among girls to minimise the risk of, and dishonour associated with, improper female sexual conduct.

Subramaniam (2008) argues that early marriage is part of the wider practice of excluding females, through their subordination to men and deprivation of equal access to social and material resources. This robs young wives of the capacity to make decisions and act independently. Dowry is another custom that limits the options available to girls and young women. The practice of dowry has a historical basis in the nature of the inheritance system, whereby a girl was given gifts in the form of *streedhan* (woman's wealth) on the occasion of her marriage, since she did not get any portion of the household wealth, which was reserved for the sons of the family. Srinivasan (2005) contends that 'modern dowry comprises demands that far exceed what families can afford, exploiting its symbolic obligatory nature … besides being extractive, a distinct feature of modern dowries is the inclusion of large amounts of gold, cash, and consumer goods' (p. 599). Poorer communities prefer to get girls married at a younger age, since the price of dowry increases as the girl gets older and families want to find a 'good match' for their daughter within the constraint of limited financial resources. A young bride is also preferred by the in-laws, since they can mould her to fit into their family and a young daughter-in-law is likely to be more docile and obedient.

A recent study (ICRW and Plan Regional Asia Office 2013) found that girls in poorer families were more vulnerable to child marriage for many reasons; for example, they left school earlier because of the costs associated with education, and limited resources were more likely to be spent on a boy's education than a girl's. The study also found that if a girl was not attending school, parents were more likely to get her married and sometimes married off a younger daughter along with an older sibling to avoid the costs of a separate marriage later. UNICEF (2014b) found that in India, the median age at first marriage was 19.7 years for females in the richest quintile of their sample compared to 15.4 for the poorest females. While poverty plays a key role in marriage decisions, discriminatory social norms that value girls primarily in terms of their reproductive capacities are critical to understanding early marriage (Harper et al. 2014). Poverty and rigid gender norms that prescribe a limited life course for girls and allow no alternatives are commonly cited explanations from the communities practising child marriage (Greene et al. 2015).

3. Data

3.1 Young Lives

A key challenge in assessing the prevalence of early marriage is that so many of these marriages remain unregistered and unofficial and are not counted in surveys or picked up in cross-sectional studies, where respondents will often give the legal age of marriage as the age at which they got married, even if they were actually younger than that. Young Lives data help to overcome this challenge. Young Lives is a longitudinal four-country study (Peru, Ethiopia, Vietnam and India) of poverty in children's lives. It has the advantage of following two cohorts of children in each country since 2002 (1,000 Older Cohort children born in 1994–5 and 2,000 Younger Cohort children born in 2001–2) and is therefore in a privileged position to ascertain when children actually got married as well as the age at which they became parents. This mixed-method paper draws on data from the India sample of the Older Cohort children from Young Lives, located in seven districts of the undivided state of Andhra Pradesh.[2] Undivided Andhra Pradesh was the fifth-largest state in India, with a population of over 80 million, 73 per cent of whom lived in rural areas. According to the 2011 Census, Andhra Pradesh (undivided) had 521,878 married children and young people between the ages of 10 and 19 years – the ninth-highest population of married children in India. Jha et al. (2015) calculated the number of children married between the ages of 10 and 18 using Census 2011 data and found that approximately 3 per cent of children aged 10–14 years and 10 per cent in the age group 15–18 years were married in undivided Andhra Pradesh, which was not very different from the national average (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Number and percentage of girls by marital status: India and sample states, 2011**

Age	Currently married	Widowed	Separated	Divorced	Total ever-married	Total females	% ever-married
India							
10–14	1,709,811	63,647	32,246	6,496	1,812,200	63,290,377	2.9
15–18*	3,232,919	78,247	26,724	7,773	3,345,663	33,592,084	9.6
Andhra Pradesh (undivided)							
10–14	95,912	4,472	1,752	310	102,446	3,992,711	2.6
15–18*	209,239	5,103	1,931	389	216,662	2,228,059	9.7

*Census 2011 data combine the respondents aged 17 years and 18 years in the same age group. Hence, a percentage of those married within the age group 15–18 years and 10–18 years include those who were married after they attained 18 years of age (the legal age of marriage).

Source: Compiled by authors from Census 2011 data.

So far, information on the Young Lives children, their households and their communities have been collected in four rounds of quantitative and qualitative data-gathering (2002, 2006, 2009 and 2013; and 2007, 2009, 2010 and 2014 respectively). The quantitative data include detailed information obtained from children, their caregivers and other community members gathered through interviews and tests. The survey rounds provide longitudinal data regarding

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2   The state of Andhra Pradesh was bifurcated into the two new states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh on 2 June 2014.

household and child characteristics, including date of birth, age at marriage, highest level of education achieved, siblings and loans taken for marriage. It is important to point out that since Young Lives has a pro-poor sample, it is not nationally representative.[3] The qualitative data were collected in four communities with a nested sample of 24 children from each cohort, their caregivers (mostly mothers, but occasionally both parents), and other key figures in the community. The qualitative research draws on a range of qualitative and participatory methods, including in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions, to understand children's everyday experiences of poverty, their changing aspirations and their diverging trajectories across time. The sample was drawn to represent a range of geographical, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds across the four communities.

A qualitative sub-study involving 42 children working in agriculture in three Young Lives communities conducted in 2011 also informs this paper. While the sub-study focused on children's work, it also captured a range of social transitions, including children's trajectories into marriage. The Round 4 qualitative survey (2014) focused specifically on drawing additional qualitative information from married boys and girls. The key themes covered during data-gathering were preparation for marriage, decision-making and norms (households and community), cultural and community contexts, changing roles and responsibilities related to marriage and support systems to manage these. Thus the data for the paper are drawn from multiple sources, not just the girls' narratives.

3.2   Model for analysis

The overall aim of the paper is to better understand which individual, household and community factors explain the emerging differential patterns of and pathways to marriage among Young Lives children, drawing upon both descriptive statistics from Rounds 1–4 of the household survey and qualitative case studies of children. Figure 1 presents the individual and household characteristics as well as the community-based socio-cultural norms we will be studying in this paper.

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3   Using sentinel site sampling, 20 sites per country were selected, with oversampling of sites in poor areas. The sites include urban and rural areas, representing a range of regions and contexts that reflect ethnic, geographical and political diversity. Within each sentinel site, 100 households with a child aged between 6 and 18 months (Younger Cohort) and 50 households with a child between 7 and 8 years (Older Cohort) were randomly selected. The sample is divided into quintiles according to per capita household expenditure, where the lowest quintile (bottom 20 per cent) of families are considered to be the 'poorest' and those in the highest quintile (top 20 per cent) the 'least poor'.

Figure 1.   *Individual, family and community characteristics related to early marriage*
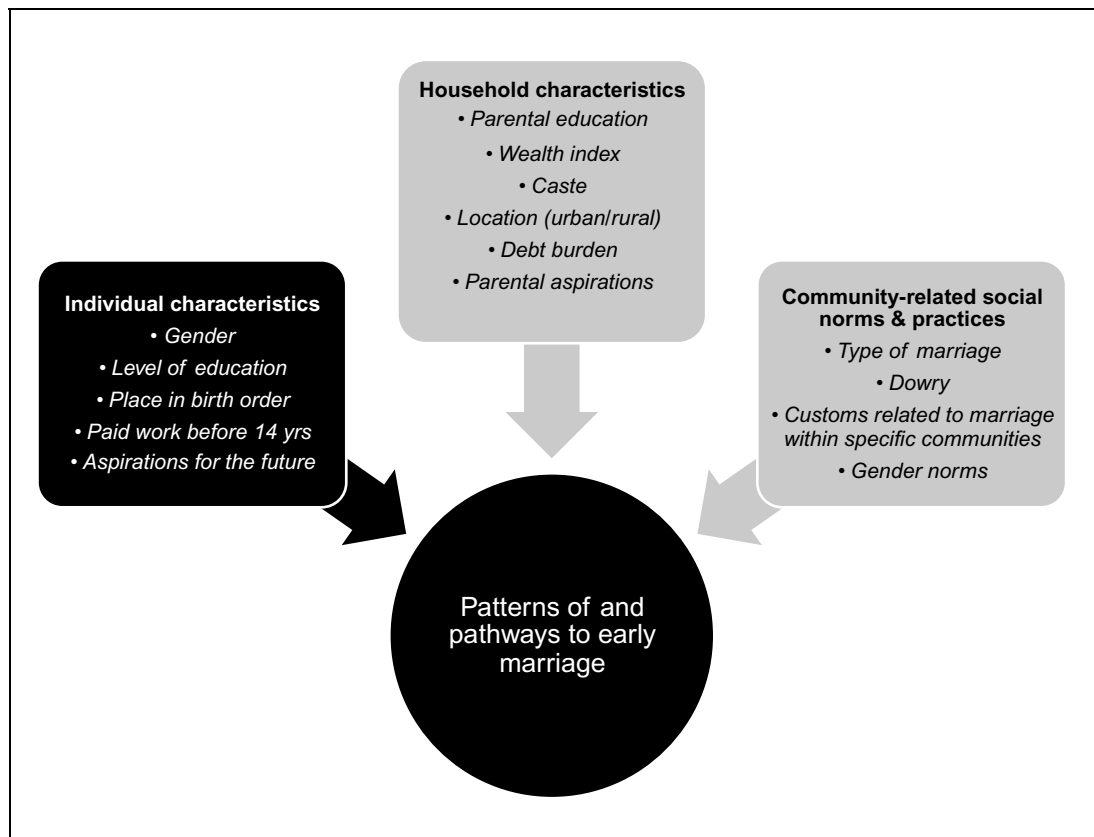
The paper uses quantitative descriptive statistics to examine the relationships between various individual, household/family and community factors, and child and early marriage. The four rounds of quantitative panel data provide household- and child-level data related to educational history and age of marriage and other details of spouse and children for 179 married girls as well as details of 307 unmarried girls. Basic socio-demographic information, like gender, caste, place of residence, place in the birth order and parental education, were obtained from Round 1 data (gathered in 2002 when the children were around 8 years old). The information on the household's economic prosperity, for which parental education and the wealth index[4] are proxies, was also taken from Round 1.

A bivariate analysis was carried out to study the association between the individual, household and community variables (shown in Figure 1) and the age of marriage. The significance of the associations has been calculated by chi-square tests. The variables we examine are described in more detail in the next three sub-sections.

3.1.1   Individual characteristics

Gender: Greene (2014) stated that very little research has taken place regarding males at risk of early marriage. We examine the marital status of both boys and girls at the age of 19, since there is evidence that boys are also married as children, although girls are

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4   The wealth index is a composite index that reflects the welfare of household members in terms of the quality of the dwelling (for example, the materials of the walls, roof etc), use of durable goods (whether the household owns a radio, TV, bicycle etc.), and access to basic services (whether the household has drinking water, electricity, etc.).

disproportionately affected (UNICEF 2014a). There are many more child brides than bridegrooms in India and according to Census 2011, the number of males married at 19 years amounted to 4 million, compared to 12.7 million girls. It is interesting to note that while the number of married boys has increased from 3.1 million in 2001 (according to the 2001 Census), the number of married girls has remained constant.

Educational level: We also examine the highest educational level achieved by girls, since studies have shown that leaving school early is a factor that contributes to child marriage (UNFPA 2012). Households typically make decisions about girls' schooling and marriage jointly, not sequentially, and education tends to lose out (UNICEF 2014b). We examine the marital status of girls according to their educational level, classifying the levels as (a) did not complete primary school, (b) primary (Grade 5), (c) upper primary, (d) secondary (Grade 10), (e) higher secondary and above.

Place in the birth order: Given that the Indian custom of getting the eldest girl in the family married off before the younger sister exists across all communities, we consider the place in the birth order of the Older Cohort girls.

Paid work: Given that Young Lives has found that participation in paid work at the age of 12 has a significant impact on whether children complete secondary school (Singh and Mukherjee 2015), we use this variable from Round 2 of the household survey, to study its impact on the age of marriage.

Educational aspirations: Girls with high educational aspirations are often able to negotiate with their parents regarding continuation of education and deferring of marriage. We therefore analyse information regarding the highest level of education girls aspire to reach at the age 12 (Round 2, household survey).

3.1.2 Household characteristics

Maternal education: Given that higher levels of maternal education are known to be significantly correlated with a lower age of marriage of girls (Bates et al. 2007), we classify mothers' education into (a) no formal education, (b) primary (Grade 5), (c) middle, (d) secondary (Grade 10) and above.

Paternal education: Also seen in the literature is that higher levels of fathers' education play a positive role in postponing the marriage of their daughters. Therefore we look at how fathers' education may be associated with the age of marriage of their daughters.

Wealth index: The poorest girls are more than three times as likely to marry by the age of 18 than those from the richest homes (UNFPA 2012). We therefore use the wealth index as a proxy for a household's economic prosperity, to understand the relationship between poverty and the age of marriage.

Caste: Despite changes in society, caste continues to play an important role in determining the age of marriage of girls and the selection of a spouse. Parents continue to prefer that their daughters to get married within their own caste (Ghosh 2011) and we therefore include caste in our analysis.

Location (urban/rural): There remains a huge urban–rural divide in terms of age of marriage, with many more girls in rural areas getting married before the legal age of 18 as compared to urban areas, according to Census 2011. We examine girls in urban and rural locations to check if the same phenomenon is observed in our sample.

Debt burden: Since household debt may be a key factor that prevents a family from marrying off their daughters at an early age or in other cases forces girls to stop their education and start working, we analyse whether debt reported by families in Round 2 of the household survey has an impact on the age of daughters' marriage.

Aspirations of mothers: Low educational aspirations of mothers for their daughters might lead to girls leaving school early to learn 'household skills'; therefore we consider this an important variable.

3.1.2 Community norms and practices

Type of marriage (arranged/love): Ghosh (2011) states that fear of girls and boys eloping to marry for 'love', scares parents into arranging marriages as early as possible. Thus marriages are largely based on familial considerations, with as many as one in ten young men and one in four young women reporting that their parents did not seek their approval when determining their marriage partner (IIPS and Population Council 2010). Drawing upon Round 4 quantitative data, we investigate the age of marriage and the type of marriage.

Dowry: We draw upon information related to 'gifts given at the time of marriage' from the Round 4 household survey and also upon information from the qualitative research.

Marriage customs specific to certain communities: In India customs related to marriage differ across certain communities and also across regions. However amongst Hindus, the *Kanyadana*, or giving away one's virgin daughter in marriage, is considered the greatest sacrifice a man can perform, across all regions. Andhra Pradesh too has varied customs related to marriage; for example, in certain communities there exists a custom according to which families marry a daughter to her maternal uncle, known as the *menarikam* system. In such marriages, it is common to find a large age gap between the bride and groom. Another common practice in some parts of Andhra Pradesh is to marry a younger sister to the elder sister's husband if the elder sister has failed to conceive after marriage (Vasavya Mahila Mandali 2013).While Islam allows all first cousins to marry, Telugus distinguish between two kinds of first cousins: cross-cousins and parallel cousins, and allow marriage of cross-cousins only. Sons and daughters of a maternal uncle or a paternal aunt are cross-cousins; for example, one's mother's brother's child is a matrilateral cross-cousin and father's sister's child is a patrilateral cross-cousin. All other first cousins, i.e. those related through one's paternal uncle or maternal aunt, are parallel cousins and considered brothers and sisters. In northern states on the other hand it is considered incest to marry a cousin or uncle and customs vary across the country based on religion as well as the traditions of certain communities. We study these some of these traditions by analysing interviews with caregivers and community members.

Gender norms: Some of the most pervasive drivers of child marriage across contexts are gendered social norms that discriminate against girls and women (Warner et al. 2014). Given the importance of gender norms, we analyse them within families and communities in the Young Lives sample.

4. Analysis

The Round 4 quantitative survey data highlighted the persistence of early marriage in our sample of Older Cohort children in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, with 37 per cent of the girls (N=179) married by the age of 19 years (including those widowed and divorced). Furthermore, 102 of the girls had already had one or more children by the age of 19. It is no surprise to see that very few boys, as compared to girls, were married by the age of 19 years, with only nine boys (2 per cent) married, and six of these fathers (Table 2).

Table 2.   *Number and percentage of Young Lives boys and girls who were married by age 19*

	Boys	%	Girls	%
Single (never married)	457	97.9	307	63.3
Married or cohabiting*	9	1.9	174	35.6
Widowed, divorced or separated	0	0.0	5	1.0
Total	466		486	
Has had a child	6		102	

*****Only 1 young man was living with his partner, not yet married.

Source: Young Lives Round 4 quantitative survey, India (Older Cohort).

This paper focuses specifically on the girls in the Young Lives sample, since more than a third of them were married by the age of 19 years and the number of married boys was very low.

4.1   **Individual characteristics affecting the marital status of girls**

We analyse the association between individual characteristics of girls and their marital status at the age of 19, by first examining how many girls and boys remained single and were married before the age of 18 years and after 18 years of age. The Older Cohort children were born in 1994–5, and in 2013, when Round 4 of the household survey was conducted, were between 18 and 19 years of age. Unlike a cross-sectional study, Young Lives is in an advantageous position to capture changes and trajectories in children's lives related to schooling, paid work and highest level of education achieved. We calculate the age of marriage by drawing upon children's date of birth from Round 1 and the date of their marriage as captured in the Round 4 household survey. Though 179 girls had reported being married, we analyse 177 ever-married girls, since we do not have the date of marriage of two girls.

Figure 2.   *Marital status of young people (aged 19) by gender (%)*
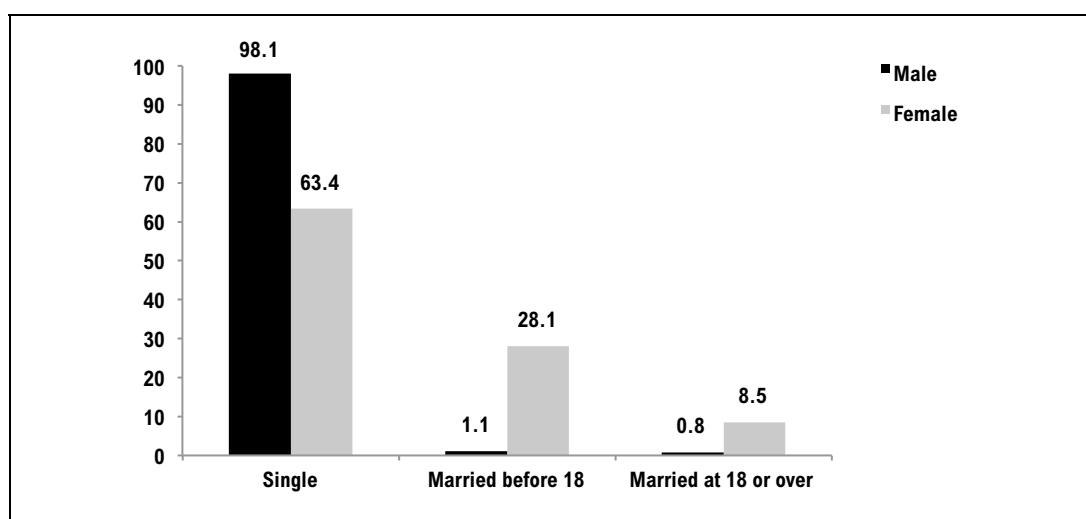
Source: Young Lives India, Round 4 survey, 2013 (Older Cohort).

Table 3.   *Marital status of girls (aged 19) by individual characteristics*

	Single (%)	Married (%)			N
		Total	Before age 18	18+	
Educational level*					
Below primary	31.6	68.4	55.3	13.2	38
Primary	31.6	68.4	57.9	10.5	38
Upper primary	34.5	65.5	56.3	9.2	87
Secondary	57.4	42.6	29.7	12.9	101
Higher secondary +	88.6	11.4	6.4	5.0	220
Birth order					
1st born	64.7	35.3	23.5	11.8	136
2nd born	64.8	35.2	27.0	8.2	159
3rd born	59.8	40.2	34.3	5.9	102
4th born & later	63.2	36.8	29.9	6.9	87
Paid work at age 12 (R2)*					
No	69.3	30.7	22.7	8.1	397
Yes	36.8	63.2	52.9	10.3	87
Mothers' aspirations when daughters were 12 (R2)*(higher education/ college and above)**					
	74.8	25.2	17.6	7.6	301

Note: Chi-square test of association: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.
Data source: Young Lives India quantitative survey, Round 1(2002), Round 2 (2006) and Round 4 (2013) (Older Cohort).

4.1.1   Girls much more likely to be married at an early age than boys

As mentioned earlier, gender is significantly associated with early marriage, and 28 per cent of the girls in the Young Lives India Older Cohort sample were married before the legal age of 18 years, while another 8 per cent got married after 18 years of age. By contrast, 1 per cent of boys were married before 18 and fewer than 1 per cent got married after 18 years of age (see Figure 2).

4.1.2 Education and early marriage

Table 3 clearly shows that the number of girls getting married before the age of 18 is significantly associated with their level of education and that the number of girls who were married after having finished secondary or senior secondary school was considerably lower than the number of married girls who had upper primary education or less. While 68 per cent of the girls who had not completed primary education got married by age of 19 (with a large proportion of these getting married before the age of 18), only 11 per cent of girls who had completed higher secondary education or higher levels of education were married by that age. Singh and Mukherjee (2015) found that boys were 1.8 times more likely than girls to complete secondary school, even after controlling for variables related to individual characteristics. Espinoza and Singh (2016) found that school enrolment at the age of 15 has the most statistically significant impact on the probability of teen marriage, reducing its likelihood by 32.2 per cent.

During the qualitative sub-study on child work conducted in 2011, it was reported that, Thulasi, a Backward Class girl living in a rural area, was married in 2007, at the age of 14, two years after attaining puberty.[5] She only attended school until Grade 5. During the interview she shared the following details about girls getting married early in her community and cited puberty, sexual harassment and distance to school as major reasons why girls drop out of school.

Interviewer: What's the appropriate age for a girl to get married?

Thulasi: 18 years is the right age, but you know in this village they don't let the girl stay unmarried for long after she becomes mature.

Interviewer: So usually at what age do girls get married here?

Thulasi: 14 or 15.

Interviewer: Is there no school in this village?

Thulasi: There is, but the last grade is the fifth. If we go to a private school, they make us study fifth grade again and that's why I didn't want to go there.

Interviewer: OK, but why did you stop studying?

Thulasi: I became mature … people at home were scared to send me back to school. That's why I had to discontinue.

Interviewer: Do people still stop mature girls from going to school?

Thulasi: No, not as much as before. They just keep it a secret and send them to school … There are also people who study till they are 16, but the village here follows a lot of sentiments [customs] and moreover, there is a lot of eve-teasing. The girls discontinue because they know that they have to get married and have to go to another house.

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5   Caste in India is divided into four official categories. Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes are recognised in the Constitution of India as historically disadvantaged, while Other Castes are the more privileged and socially and educationally advantaged castes. Readers should also note that all names of respondents and research sites are pseudonyms, in order to preserve anonymity.

The distance of upper primary and secondary schools from smaller habitations, particularly in difficult terrain, is a common cause of girls discontinuing schooling, because of associated safety issues and the threat of sexual harassment. This places girls at high risk of getting married soon after puberty.

4.1.4 Birth order and sibling dynamics

Surprisingly birth order does not emerge as a significant factor associated with the age of marriage. However, further analysis related to the gender of the eldest sibling reveals that having a brother as the eldest sibling is significantly associated with early marriage. A total of 44 per cent of girls who were married before 18 years had a brother as their eldest sibling, while this was the case for only 25 per cent of the girls who married after they were 18 (Table 4). Espinoza and Singh (2016) using Young Lives data also find the presence of an older brother increases the probability of marriage by 19, while the presence of an older sister reduces it. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the eldest brother would be able to contribute to the household earnings, which would allow the household to bear marriage-related expenses including dowry. On the other hand, following the social norm that the eldest sister must be married before the younger ones, having an elder sister would be a deterrent to getting married early in most cases.

Table 4. *Association between eldest sibling is brother and the age of girls at marriage (%)*

Eldest sibling is brother	Age of marriage	
	Before 18 years	**After 18 years**
No	55.9	75.6
Yes	44.1***	24.4
Total	100 (N=136)	100 (N=41)

 ***Chi-square association between whether the eldest sibling is brother and age of girls' marriage is highly significant at 1% (p < 0.01) level.

4.1.4 Paid work at age 12

Girls' participation in paid work at the age of 12 has also emerged as significantly associated with the age at which they got married. The descriptive analysis finds that whereas 30 per cent of girls who did paid work at the age of 12 remained single at 19, 63 per cent were married, with 53 per cent married before 18 years of age.[6]

Child labour is undoubtedly a key factor that impedes regular attendance at school and many children in the Young Lives sample report combining school and work from the early grades of primary school. While 16 per cent of the children were involved in paid and unpaid work at the ages of 11/12, this increased to almost 58 per cent by the time they were 14/15, near the end of their elementary education (Singh, forthcoming). Among those aged 14/15, nearly half were combining school and unpaid work – for example, doing domestic chores and care work within their own homes and on their farms – and another 13 per cent were combining school and paid work. This suggests that many children between the ages of 12 and 15 combine some form of work and schooling, and that the number of children able to attend

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6   Since the paper is only using descriptive statistics, at no point is causality of early marriage claimed.

school full time decreases as children enter upper primary schooling (Grades 6–8). Singh and Mukherjee (2015) found that children who did not participate in paid work at the age of 12 were 2.2 times more likely to complete secondary education than those children who did participate in it.

Devi Sri, a Backward Class girl interviewed in the agriculture study (2011), was married at the age of 15, after completing Grade 9. She said that she had been combining work and school since Grade 7. Her first job, in flower harvesting, required her to work over the weekends and holidays, while she washed clothes on Sundays as well as feeding her family's livestock and washing the dishes. The family had no land of their own and used to lease land for cultivation. She reported that while her father was not in favour of the children doing hard labour, her mother felt that "we [were] poor and she sent us for work, to make as much money as we could". Devi Sri explained, "My parents were poor and they never had money to give me and I understood their situation." Her father and brother sold off the cattle they owned for her marriage and then sold off the sheep for her sister's marriage. "We are left with nothing. We don't have farms or anything," Devi Sri said in 2011.

Since her marriage, Devi Sri has been living in a joint family[7] consisting of ten members and helps with household chores such as washing dishes and feeding animals as well as with farm work such as planting seeds on land leased by her in-laws. She also helps to wash clothes for other households, since it is the family's traditional occupation. Devi Sri recounts that when she did farm work (during her childhood) she felt tired, and got pain in her hands and body. She also says that she got heat boils on her hands because of holding the sickle and while carrying paddy. She complained that "my nails would hurt when we separated the grass from the wheat to get the grains. Even now my nails hurt a lot, … in fact it is worse after marriage … as we work on the farm which we took on lease … Before I used to work as daily labour and it was optional."

Clearly the status of the new bride is dependent not only on the material possessions of the marital household, but on her social positioning within the new family. Devi Sri's husband was keen for her to take her Grade 10 exam and tried to pay for her to sit as a private candidate, but the due date for paying the exam fee had passed and she only attended school for only two or three months after getting married. A year after the marriage, he went to Kuwait to work as a labourer and sends money to his parents. Devi Sri feels bad that she married early, but is happy that her mother-in-law treats her "like her own daughter" and buys her whatever she needs.

4.1.5 Intergenerational transmission of poverty

It is important to understand how, as Taefi (2009) suggests, 'girls are marginalised within the category of children as women, and within the category of women as children' (p. 347). Bhavana's case study reflects the intergenerational transmission of poverty and shows how both her mother and Bhavana continue to struggle to survive through hard manual labour. Both were married at an early age.

Bhavana a Backward Class girl living in Katur, a rural mandal in Rayalseema, is part of the qualitative sample, and we have interviewed her and her caregivers since 2007. She left school after Grade 2, following the death of her father, who had fallen onto a rock while

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7   Joint family in India refers to extended families consisting of several generations living under the same roof and running one common kitchen

drunk. She is the youngest in her family and has three elder brothers. The older two brothers did not go to school, while her third brother attended school until Grade 4. Bhavana explains that she had to leave school, since she used to accompany her family for seasonal migration to Mumbai to do construction work. At 15 she was doing agricultural work such as removing groundnut plants, working in paddy fields and assisting with masonry work. She found groundnut harvesting difficult and complained that she got boils on her hands while working in the groundnut fields: "Blisters have come on the palms … even eating food has become difficult." In Round 3 (2010), Bhavana was under immense pressure and had to attend to both household work and paid work since her sister-in-law did no work. She complained that she had to wake up at 1.00 am to cook food:

> "We are a large number of people in the household. I have to cook two *seres* (about 3½ kilograms) of rice … it is very difficult. When I was going to school, I [was only] sweeping the house premises … now I have to do all the work … it was good when I was going to school."

In 2010 Bhavana told us that she would probably get married in the next two to three years and said she expected to work harder: "If there is more land there [at her in-laws' house]… I will have to work more … otherwise there will be *Ramayana*[8] with husband and *Ramayana* with mother-in-law." In other words she feared that she would have fights with her future husband and mother-in-law.

Bhavana's mother was keen to get her daughter married, but worried about "how to get the money necessary to give to the boy's family" (i.e. the dowry). Bhavana's mother recounted the extreme difficulty she had faced after getting married at the age of 12 and the abuse she had suffered at the hands of her in-laws since she did not know how to do farm work. Her husband decided to live separately from his parents, but he was an alcoholic and had a physical impairment and did no work. The family used to migrate to Mumbai in search of work, and Bhavana's mother recounts that when Bhavana was born the couple had lots of quarrels. On one occasion she walked out of the house at night and was bitten by a snake. The mother feels that the household circumstances improved after her husband's death.

> "He [the husband] used to smoke *beedis* [local cigars] and consume tobacco also … it used to cost Rs.450 per month … To get the amount I had to work in the houses of rich people … I had to find money for alcohol and *beedis* of husband … also I had to feed the children."

She also feels that now she has more control over how to spend the money, though she now remains under the pressure from the son and daughter-in-law who are living with her.

When asked to compare her life at 14 with Bhavana's in 2010, the mother said:

> "I was only 12 years at the time of my marriage, married less than a year after puberty … Since then I have been working … I suffered due to my in-laws and due to my brother-in-law ... [but] did not suffer in [my] parents' house. With regard to Bhavana, she is now 14 and not married but has been facing problems [in the parental home] since the age of 12 … because of her sisters-in-law [who fight and do no work]."

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8   A Hindu epic poem, in which there is a lot of in-fighting between family members.

At 14, Bhavana felt she would be married in the next two to three years and said that she thought her life would be "the same here [parental home] and also in husband's home … there is no happiness for me … I think like that."

When interviewed in Round 4 of the qualitative survey (2014), Bhavana told us about her arranged marriage at the age of 16 to an auto-rickshaw driver, who had attended school till Grade 7. She had been given no say in the marriage, which was decided by her brother, who felt it was a "good match". The family spent approximately Rs.200,000 on the wedding expenses and dowry and took a loan for Rs.120,000 from Bhavana's uncle, which had not been repaid by her two brothers until 2014.

At 19 years of age, Bhavana spends her time doing daily wage labour outside the household as well as all the household work in her in-laws' house. Bhavana and her mother had felt that marriage would be an escape for Bhavana; however Bhavana feels that there is more work at her in-laws': her mother-in-law "does nothing" and she gives all her earnings to her husband. When asked about changes that had occurred in her life after getting married, she said, "Wherever I am, it is the same… it was better as long as I was in my parental place … there is more work here [marital home]. … I cannot open my mouth … [I] have to work continuously." And in this interview extract, she again says that her life is as bad as her mother's:

> Interviewer: Do you find any difference in the work done and the life between you and your mother?
> Bhavana: I saw my mother since our childhood … she has been doing hard work without taking a break even for a day… It is same [for me ... I am also working in the same way.

Bhavana's case study shows how neither mother nor daughter has been able to escape marriage at a young age. Both had to leave school before completing primary education. They are caught in a web of inter-generational poverty. Her story also shows how some women have very few rights to make decisions about their lives, constantly remaining subservient to fathers, husbands and sons.

4.1.6   Positive role of educational aspirations

The descriptive statistics (Table 3) reveal that three-quarters of the girls who, at the age of 12, aspired to join higher education, remained unmarried at 19 years of age. While Bhavana's trajectory is typical of girls who leave school before completing their primary education, engage in child labour from a very young age and marry soon after puberty to continue working as daily wage earners, there is a large number of girls in our sample who, despite the odds, were still in education at the age of 19. It is important to note that 58 per cent of the girls who completed secondary school and 89 per cent of the ones who completed senior secondary education, remained single at 19 years of age, and it is critical to study their pathways and learn lessons from the enablers that supported them. Educational aspirations are a key factor that deflects the trajectories of certain girls away from early marriage, as is evident from Sarada's case.

Sarada, who is a Backward Class girl living in Poompuhar, a poor rural community in Telangana, is an example of how a young girl has surmounted many barriers, to continue her education at the age of 20 years. Sarada has a physical impairment and belongs to a poor family who wash clothes for a living. Her father married twice and has a second family in Mumbai, while Sarada lives with her mother and younger sister in the village; until quite recently and her step-brother also lived with them. Sarada's younger sister and older brother had to discontinue their education in order to clear a debt taken on by the family to repair

their home, which had collapsed. Despite pressure to leave school, Sarada is the only one who resisted being pulled out of school to work on the cotton farm. She did this by lodging a complaint with the labour inspector, with support from a self-help group for disabled people and from her teacher. Sarada continued her senior secondary education in a government institution and received a scholarship of Rs.7,000. She has been getting a monthly pension from the Government, allocated for persons with disabilities. She then joined a degree course – BA (arts) – and took up a job teaching children in her village (night school), which pays her Rs.1,000 per month and gives her enough money for travel to college, and buy books and stationery. She does not receive financial support from her family. It is interesting to note that Sarada had very clear aspirations and during the interview conducted in 2014, she said the following:

> *Interviewer: If you did not get the pension and you did not earn money from tuition, would it have been a problem to study?*
>
> Sarada: I would not have stopped my studies. I would have joined the college at any cost. Earning money by giving tuition benefited me. Because I am handicapped, they did not take fees [for my] degree … Sometimes there won't be money in the house when I need it. Because of the household expenses, money is not always available [from] the elders in the family. I boldly decided to study as I have my own income.

Sarada plans to do her B.Ed (a professional teaching qualification) after completing her first degree and aspires to become a teacher. When asked about her future plans to get married she said:

> Sarada: I would marry whom my parents select. But I also have my own feelings and opinions.
>
> *Interviewer: What are those?*
>
> Sarada: That man should look after me well. He should not send me to do farm work. I don't mind doing household chores. If he asks me to earn money by teaching children I am willing to do that. But I would not go and do farm work. The in-laws should not scream at me. I won't like it. They have to give respect to my opinion. When I say anything, instead of shouting and criticising, they must think whether I am right or not. They should not nag me not to do that or not to do this and restrict me not to talk to that person or this person. They should try to understand me, my feelings and how I will take care of them. When I cook, they should not criticise my cooking all the time. If I don't cook well they should get adjusted. Once a month they should take me to my parents' house. My parents should be allowed to visit me whenever they feel like it. They should allow me to go to them on my own whenever I want.
>
> *Interviewer: In your village or among your friends, a lot of marriages have taken place. When you see those couples, do you think all the things you said are feasible?*
>
> Sarada: Whenever I see my elder sister and my parents, I wonder what kind of husband I will end up with. When I compare their life with mine I think my life is the best and I want to remain like this [single]. Did you see the lady sitting here a little while ago? When her husband beat her up I was shocked. He beat her up horribly.

Evidently, Sarada has a clear idea of the sort of person she would like to be married to, even though she is ready for an arranged marriage. Education has given her the confidence that she can think and exercise her agency regarding marriage. It is interesting to see how Sarada's determination, disability allowance and membership of a self-help group, as well as

her mother's aspiration to educate her (since she has a disability and may not find a suitable match), have supported Sarada's aspirations to continue in higher education and become financially independent.

4.2   Household characteristics

As seen in the previous sub-section, girls are likely to have varied trajectories during adolescence, and pathways to marriage or continuing education are based on a large number of factors. At the household level we analyse variables related to parental education, caste, debt, wealth index and rural/urban place of residence to determine what effect these have on the marital status of 19-year-old girls.

Table 5 (below) clearly highlights that both mother's and father's education are significantly associated with the age of marriage of girls, and as the level of education of parents increases, the likelihood of girls getting married by the age of 19 decreases. The analysis highlights that fewer than 10 per cent of girls whose mothers had secondary education or more than that were married, while 17.5 per cent of those whose fathers had that level of education were married by 19 years of age. On the other hand 33 per cent and 39 per cent of girls with mothers and fathers with no formal education, were married before the age of 18 years, while 43 and 47 per cent of girls were married by the age of 19 years.

4.2.1   Aspirations of mothers related to girls' education

Parental perceptions, aspirations for their children and views about the importance of education seem to be very strong factors in determining the trajectories of girls during their adolescent years. Table 5 shows that 78 per cent of girls whose mothers aspired for their daughters to complete college education, remained unmarried at 19 years and only 22 per cent had got married amongst these girls. Conversely, girls whose mothers had low educational aspirations for them were more likely to get married.

As mentioned earlier, Bhavana's mother, who did not complete her primary schooling, was married at the age of 12. Bhavana was made to leave school, since the mother believed that it would not benefit her:

> "Even if educated and the girl went to school … it would make no difference and there would be no change in our life. It makes no difference whether educated or not educated … even if she were to be educated, still it not possible to get a job; she might still have to work; there are no jobs around. Then what's the point in getting schooled? No schooling can get her a job. She has to work … that's all. We were wise enough [to] let them [her children] drop out of school. We are not sure of any job – anyway there are many jobless here. Who is getting jobs? I haven't seen a single person from this village getting a job and feeding others."

Because Bhavana's father has died the mother feels that her daughter is "fated" , that is, that she is suffering some kind of inescapable misfortune and that she and the family must make the best of it. She regards it as her own duty to prepare her daughter for her fate, and she also wants to protect her daughter against potential criticism: "Well, if she is married to someone, they must not accuse us of her being raw and unskilled. They must not accuse us of not teaching her to work and so she must not roam about but learn how to survive." Bhavana's mother arranged for her daughter to get married at 16 years of age to an auto-rickshaw driver, because as soon as Bhavana turned 15 years of age, people had started questioning the mother about when her daughter would become betrothed and, being a widow, she felt that "if

I give her to somebody [in marriage], then I will be free from responsibilities." She clearly feels under pressure from social norms and other people's expectations.

Table 5. *Association of family characteristics and marriage of girls by 19 years of age*

	Single	Married			N
		Total	Before age 18	18 or over	
FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS					
Mother's education ***					
No formal education	57.1	42.9	33.2	9.6	322
Primary	58.3	41.7	31.3	10.4	48
Middle	81.4	18.6	11.6	7.0	43
Secondary & above	90.6	9.4	5.7	3.8	53
Father's education***					
No formal education	53.0	47.0	39.2	7.8	232
Primary	63.3	36.7	30.6	6.1	49
Middle	67.2	32.8	12.1	20.7	58
Secondary & above	83.5	16.5	11.7	4.9	103
Wealth index (R1)***					
Bottom	54.7	45.3	34.8	10.6	161
Middle	59.5	40.5	33.7	6.8	163
Top	76.3	23.7	15.6	8.1	160
Place of residence***					
Urban	80.7	19.3	13.2	6.1	114
Rural	58.1	41.9	32.7	9.2	370
Caste*					
Scheduled Caste	62.4	37.6	30.7	6.9	101
Scheduled Tribe	65.6	34.4	29.5	4.9	61
Backward Classes	57.7	42.3	32.6	9.7	215
Other Castes	74.8	25.2	15.9	9.3	107
Debt burden (R2)					
No	66.2	33.8	25.9	7.9	228
Yes	60.9	39.1	30.1	9.0	256
Mothers' aspirations when daughters were 12 (R2)***(college/ higher education)					
	77.8	22.2	15.3	6.9	248

On the other hand Sarada's mother is a huge support and has high aspirations for Sarada. She confirms that she would prefer her daughter to complete her degree and then find a job. She says:

> "I don't know about others but I feel with my whole heart, that she should complete 15th class [degree] and find some job so that she can live her life. If she cannot find anything then that's her destiny. What can we do? When any alliance comes they ask for our younger daughter. Nobody would ask for older girls. People say that girls should be married off at younger age. They start asking the parents, as soon as the girl reaches 10 years of age, about her marriage … they marry the girl off in this minute and the next minute, they send her off to work, handing her a sickle and spade. It depends on their destiny whether they will have a hard life or a happy life. If it is written in their destiny then they cannot avoid it. I don't want my children to end up working from such an early age – that's why I keep postponing their marriage. Girls of Sarada's age and my younger daughter's [age] are all married now."

ICRW and Plan Asia Regional Office (2013) report that parents feel it is their responsibility to marry their daughters off and protect their chastity, and early marriage ensures an honourable discharge of this duty. Parents who delay the marriage of their daughters are seen as failing in their parental responsibilities and have to face adverse comments from the community. This responsibility also seems to be extended to other influential actors, such as elder brothers, who seem to play an important role in determining when their sisters should be married and who they should be married to. Clearly Bhavana's mother considered work to be more important than education, and her own life experiences of having faced abuse because of not knowing how to work on the farm have undoubtedly shaped her views about what should be important in terms of skill development during Bhavana's adolescent years. Conversely, unsure that she will be able to get a good match for her daughter, because of her disability, Sarada's mother is keen that she completes her degree, so that she can be independent and get gainful employment. Circumstances can shape the way parents' ambitions and aspirations for their children evolve and parents may in many instances take hard decisions, which may or may not prove not be in the best interest of children in the long run.

4.2.2 Poverty, caste and location

Table 5 (above) clearly shows that girls from the poorer terciles were much more likely to get married at 19 years (45 per cent) compared to the least poor (24 per cent). Caste analysis also reveals that while a quarter of Other Caste (most privileged) girls got married by 19 compared to girls from the Backward Classes (42 per cent), Scheduled Castes (38 per cent) and Scheduled Tribes (34 per cent), this pattern remained similar for girls married before the age of 18 as well. Young Lives data show that many more girls from rural areas are married before 18 years of age as compared to those living in urban locations, which is very similar to UNFPA's (2012) finding that across the developing world, rural girls are twice as likely as their urban counterparts to marry as children (44 per cent versus 22 per cent). The majority of the married Young Lives girls live in rural areas; 42 per cent of rural girls were married by 19, compared to only 19 per cent of the urban girls. One of the reasons for this may be the infrastructural barriers that exist in terms of lack of secondary schools in villages and long distances from villages to the nearest town. Another may be the very conservative views held by villagers. For example, Bhavana's mother states that unmarried girls who have passed puberty cannot go out of the house without attracting disapproval.

> "If both these girls go out to play, what do people say? … they find fault with them … Now they cannot go out … people of our village speak like that … This is the condition in the village … we won't send a girl of Bhavana's age outside. TVs are installed in the houses to prevent the children from going to the houses of others. They cannot go outside as was done earlier. Further, you have to move within your circle, this means with women only … [a girl] should not speak with boys … Her brothers have said to her, "We will not allow you to live … if we hear anything [about your character] we will kill you without a trace." Bhavana feared this warning so much that, she has completely stopped going outside the house."

4.2.3 Debt burden

While place of residence (urban/rural), wealth and caste emerge as significantly associated with the age of marriage of the girls, debt burden is not significantly associated with it. However, the qualitative interviews with young girls and their caregivers reveal that debt associated with the marriage of elder siblings or health expenditure, particularly where there was a need to pay a high dowry, could actually defer a girl's marriage. Having an elder sister

means the family will already have taken out loans for her marriage and elder brothers once again play a significant role in contributing to saving up money and taking out loans to get their sisters married.

Sania, an 18-year-old Muslim girl living in a densely populated area of Hyderabad, is one such example, since at 20 she remained unmarried because of debt incurred by her family. She was keen to stay on at school, but debt incurred because of the marriage of her elder sister forced her to leave school in Grade 10. The mother reports that the family spent Rs.300,000 on the wedding and she still owes her brother-in-law 50,000 rupees. Sania's elder brother also had to leave school in Grade 11 and take up work in a betel (*paan*) shop.[9] In the Round 4 qualitative survey, Sania said, **"**I am not doing anything. I am not even studying any more. I am just staying in the house. I have put on weight." Her mother told us that she would like Sania to get married in the next two to three years but would prefer her son to get married first, since her sister is offering Rs.200,000 in dowry if her daughter is allowed to marry Sania's brother. However, the son has refused to get married before his younger sister. Sania's family has incurred further expenses, since Sania's elder sister was not treated well by her in-laws and has moved back in with her parents, which means that they have had to bear the additional expenses related to two grandchildren.

It is critical to highlight that despite all efforts to pay huge dowries and meet the demands of in-laws, many girls are far from happy. Sania's sister returned to her parents' home within three months of her marriage. Also important is the fact that boys such as Sania's brother are also burdened by the debt that the family has incurred and are unlikely to have a say regarding which girl they should marry. Debt burden related to marriage therefore impacts both boys and girls directly and indirectly.

4.3   Social and community norms

It is interesting to note how socio-cultural norms regarding marriage differ amongst various communities. As Table 6 shows, approximately 29 per cent of the married girls in our sample were married to their relatives. Arranged marriages were three times as common as love marriages and a dowry was paid in every case. Other customs had a significant effect on the type and timing of girls' marriages, as we recount below.

Table 6.   *Socio-cultural and community norms and practices related to marital status of girls*

	Married before age 18	Married after age 18	Total	%
Type of marriage				
Love	76.5	23.5	17	9.7%
Arranged	76.9	23.1	160	90.3%
Dowry amount *				
Up to 1 lakh	78.1	21.9	105	60.3%
1 to 3 lakh	78.9	21.2	52	29.8%
Above 3 lakh	58.8	41.2	17	9.7%
Whether spouse related by blood				
No	76.8	23.2	125	70.6%
Yes	76.9	23.1	52	29.3%

1 lakh = Rs.100,000.

9   Betel is a stimulant like tobacco. It is chewed.

4.3.1 Type of marriage

Though middle-class young people and those from more privileged backgrounds are increasingly participating in secondary and even higher education, most communities in India still follow the practice of arranged marriages, wherein young people do not have a 'real decision' in spouse selection. This is more pronounced amongst the poorest communities, who aim to marry off the girl as fast as a match is identified. In our sample, 90 per cent of the girls had arranged marriages with boys (including relatives) that the family had chosen, and the majority of arranged marriages (77 per cent) were for girls under 18 (Table 6), highlighting the fact that families are key to taking the decision about when and to whom girls will be married. Parents wish to see their daughters 'safely' married off during their life time. As mentioned earlier, it is common in a number of southern states to marry the daughter to a maternal uncle and, in certain communities, to cousins. Where child marriage is prevalent, there is strong social pressure on families to prevent girls choosing their own partner and eloping, which would lead to ridicule and family shame (Vasavya Mahila Mandali 2013).

Ameena, a Muslim girl living in Hyderabad, was married at the age of 16 years to her maternal aunt's son (her cousin) soon after she failed one paper in Grade 10. Her father worked as a cook and she has an elder brother as well as two younger brothers. Ameena's parents gave her gold, furniture, clothes, etc., for her wedding. Unfortunately, problems began three months after her wedding because of loans incurred by Ameena's husband, leading to fights in the household. Ameena's mother sold off her gold and took out a loan from moneylenders to give her son-in-law Rs.40,000, to clear his debts. Her mother says:

> "We never thought of marrying her so soon. I have [high blood] sugar and blood pressure problems and I suffer with kidney problems also. If I die who will take care of the girl? People are always ready to slander a girl if she is alone. Even if she comes to the door they would say that she is standing there to look at somebody."

She married Ameena to her sister's son, thinking she would be happy, but unfortunately her sister died soon after the marriage and the father-in-law and husband started harassing Ameena. She was extremely concerned about Ameena and told us that her son-in-law was "sometimes good and sometimes bad".

While arranged marriage remains the norm in India, Ghosh (2011) states that in recent times there have been cases of girls and boys eloping to marry for 'love', and this scares the parents into arranging marriages. Arranged marriages are accepted by women because, culturally, their virginity and reputation are closely linked to the honour of the family as a whole, which is why families and girls consider that 'parents know best' and will choose the most appropriate partner. Rajesh's mother, during a community interview in 2014, said that "now everyone is in love, these days love marriages are common. We will get them married, but our children will not wait. They will abandon us and go away." Another community member said that the trend of falling in love was "rising alarmingly":

> "The reason why it has gone up is that parents are not able to guide [young people] properly and they have totally failed in this regard. It is true that the parents want them to go out and study well and come up in life. They are doing their best in the interest of their children, but the children are not abiding by their parents' expectations. They are led astray. In the name of falling in love they are getting carried away."

Though the number of girls having love marriages has remained small, Preethi presents an interesting case study of a girl exercising agency and choosing her life partner. It is interesting to note that against prevailing thought, 11 girls from the Young Lives sample (6.2 per cent of

the married girls) were continuing their education after getting married, and the qualitative interview with Preethi highlights that spouses can play a critical role in supporting married girls to pursue their educational aspirations, even amongst Scheduled Tribe girls, who are at high risk of early marriage.

Preethi, a Scheduled Tribe girl living in Manipur, a tribal mandal in north coastal Andhra Pradesh, completed her senior secondary schooling and joined a private college. The parents, who were poor farmers, were keen for their four children to study and the mother said:

> "We don't have rights to hinder their choice of studies. To what extent they want to study, let them study. It is good if you make your future. But I don't want my children to become hard workers [daily wage earner]. As they are studying, they will get some posting or the other and earn [a regular income]. They can live, according to their wishes We don't want our situation to be repeated by them."

In first year at college, Preethi fell in love with her husband and ran away to get married. Her household factors had a lot of influence on her decision to get married. In Round 3 (2010), Preethi had told us how her father had a bad drinking habit and that "whenever my father drank he used to beat my mother … at home we are short of food due to this habit."

Preethi reports that her mother was receiving proposals for her from suitors who had already been married and she decided that her husband was the best match and the best person to marry. She says:

> "My mother tried to look for an alliance for me and she could not find any good proposal. When I saw my mother worrying about me, it made me decide to go away and marry my husband. I have weighed all my options and pros and cons … I thought that it would be difficult to find somebody as good as him. It is a guarantee that I won't end up with a drunkard. My husband doesn't have any vices. He is a very caring person. He is good not only with me, but with others too. I thought, when I found such a good person, Why shouldn't marry him? And so I took the step. After the marriage, my parents also realised that he was a good person and didn't mind."

Her husband was employed as a teacher and was five years older than her and though he approached Preethi's parents for her hand, was not given permission to marry her, which led to their elopement. Preethi was encouraged to continue her studies after her marriage by her husband and she continued attending college, for which he bore the expenses. However six months after her marriage she became pregnant and had a baby girl, and had to leave college in the seventh month of pregnancy, though she has every intention to sit for her exams, since the baby will be three months old by then and her husband is encouraging her to continue studying and become a teacher.

4.3.2. Dowry

Dowry represents a major expense for poor families, and loans taken out for this purpose can burden them for years. Almost 60 per cent of the families of the girls in our sample who got married by age of 19 years had paid a dowry of 1 lakh (Rs.100,000) while 10 per cent had paid above 3 lakh (Table 6). Given the fact that many of the sample households are poor, this dowry would cause very great stress to the natal family. Bhavana's mother explains that:

> "now they ask a lot [of dowry] … even the poor will ask … they ask for one thola [ten grams] of gold for the boy and 20,000 or 30,000 rupees … if it is rich people they will ask in lakhs … it is less among poor … if it is rich people they ask 200,000 or 300,000 rupees."

The payments made in the past by lower-caste families were 'symbolic' in nature, not involving significant transfers of value (for the bride's family). However, with the recent economic growth, lower-caste families feel obliged to provide a significantly greater transfer of value and this has become increasingly burdensome for lower-caste families (Self and Grabowski 2008). Dowry is expected even if the wedding is within the family. One of the mothers said that she had given dowry for both her daughter and her niece, who were married to sons of her sister-in-law, for which they had to take out loans and mortgage their crops. As mentioned earlier, young brides have to give smaller dowries, and in certain states, such as Rajasthan, young girls may also be married off when their elder siblings are being married, to save the cost of a separate wedding. This, of course, contributes to early marriage.

4.3.3 Traditions and customs related to marriage

Traditions and customs, such as a period of mourning after the death of an elder, in which no celebration such as marriage can take place, and another custom that sisters must get married before a brother, play an important role in determining the age of marriage of girls. Harika, a Backward Class girl who lived in a village in southern Telangana, stopped her education after completing her senior secondary examination. Though she was keen to take a Bachelor's degree, she did not get a place at a college with a hostel and her elder brother was against it, saying: "It is not good for girls to go and come every day in the bus, and whatever education she had is enough." Harika's brother's marriage was arranged because his foster father was very sick and he wanted to see the boy married. The marriage had to be performed in the same year because of a local custom that dictates that in the event of the death of an elder member in the family, marriages can be performed in the fifth year after death and then in the ninth year. Since it was the fifth year after the death of Harika's grandfather, there would have been a four-year wait if the marriage had not been performed during the same year. The family then encountered another custom, according to which when there is a girl of marriageable age in the family, the marriage of this girl has to be performed first (before the son's) even if the boy is an elder brother. This remains a community tradition and every family is expected to follow the tradition, failing which the family gets a bad name and is blamed for neglecting the girl. As a result, Harika's marriage was arranged with an educated boy from the same village, and she was married a few hours before her brother on the same day. Though Harika seemed happily married she said, "All my family members decided about my marriage – mother, father, paternal uncle and maternal aunt and did not inform me about the wedding in the beginning." She only met her husband once before the wedding, even though he belonged to the same village. She told us, "Everything happened so suddenly that I tensed up due to that also. If I'd had time to prepare myself I might have felt a little better." By 2014 Harika was eight months pregnant and had earlier undergone a miscarriage. Her husband was well educated and Harika says that:

> "they [her in-laws] asked for four lakhs and ten tolas of gold … we gave three lakhs and six tolas gold [in dowry] … Since my marriage and my elder brother's marriage took place on the same day everything got covered. His in-laws gave him three lakhs. So my parents gave that money to my in-laws. So we just needed money for the marriage expenses."

Her husband is related to her since Harika's mother and father-in-law are cousins and she says that most alliances in their community are fixed between relatives.

It is evident that girls such as Harika, entering marriage, face difficulties in protecting their sexual and reproductive health; they generally lack knowledge about their sexual and reproductive health and any services available to them, and are often uninformed of their

rights in this area (Greene et al. 2015). A majority of married girls in the qualitative study reported a lack of awareness about contraceptives and sexual reproductive health. A few also reported miscarriages.

4.3.4 Patriarchy and gender norms

Persisting patriarchy and son preference are a key factors in girls being denied an opportunity to develop skills and agency that would put them in a stronger position to make decisions related to their lives. Focus group interviews held with community members in 2011 as part of the qualitative sub-study on agriculture revealed that within the village "boys get married at the age of 18 years and girls from 12 years". They highlighted existing mindsets and perceptions related to adolescent girls: "Parents continue [to educate] the boys until college … but they don't send girls to college. Because when girls attain puberty, parents arrange their marriages." This is a reflection of the persistence of gender discrimination and as one community member explained: "Few parents think that if they gave good education to girl child, it would be useful to their father-in-law's family. But if you provide a good education to [the] boy it is useful to them [the parents]." Families and communities see girls as having little importance outside their roles as wives, while boys are given preference, in the belief that they will look after their parents (Delprato et al. 2015).

The practices of child marriage and dowry are rooted in patriarchy and gender discrimination, and the treatment of boys remains distinctly different from girls, starting from a very young age. For example Ramya's mother said that while she took her two daughters to work on the farm even while they were attending school, she did not do the same to her son. When asked to explain this discrimination she suggested that:

> "girls are healthier. That's why. When the girls are working anyway why should he work? And he is the only son we have. That's why we did not let him work on the farm … it would have been different if we had had two or three sons."

This sort of gender discrimination exists across India and an example of how this socialisation process affects young boys of marriageable age can be seen in the response of Ranadeep, an Older Cohort boy, to the type of girl he will marry and the dowry he will expect. Ranadeep, who dropped out of school after failing Grade 10, owing to irregular school attendance related to working on his family's farm, was firm that he would marry a girl of his status: "It will not be good if the girl has studied more than me. We must be equal to each other, or I must be at a higher level and she must be at a lower level." He plans to settle for a dowry of just over two lakhs, since:

> "We gave my sister three lakhs so we need to recover to some extent … we need to take four lakhs. If I have a job we can take four lakhs … they will feel I will take care of the girl well … but [since] I am [only working in the fields] who will give [this amount]?"

Unless we change world views held by young men such as Ranadeep and engage young men in efforts to change social norms based on gender stereotypes, it is unlikely that India will see a shift in persistent gender inequality. Undoubtedly, the age of marriage is only one marker of girls' autonomy and we need to be cautious in advocating for girls to be married only after the legal age of 18 years. What is critical is for mindsets towards girls to change and for their role to be perceived as being more than just a daughter, wife and mother.

4.3.5 Winds of change

ICRW and Plan Asia Regional Office, 2013 report stated that girls from poor families may continue with their education if there is determination and a desire to study. The aspirations of the family are often a function of the exposure to possibilities for women. Young Lives finds that there are examples of young women who are making their own decisions and defying existing social norms that perpetuate gender discrimination.

Keerthi, as reported by Singh and Mukherjee (2015), was a Scheduled Tribe girl, who, despite belonging to the poorest wealth quartile, successfully completed her secondary education and went on to pursue higher education because she had a very high sense of self-belief. Keerthi has two brothers and her father works as a home guard while her mother works in a school as a helper. Though Keerthi initially wanted to take up medicine, she later decided to pursue engineering instead. In 2014 (Round 4 of the qualitative survey), Keerthi's mother proudly said that her daughter had managed to get admission to one of the best private engineering colleges on her own merit, though many people questioned how "such [a] poor and low-status girl [could] get a place there". She says that:

> "If Keerthi can get a job after her studies then we won't have to worry about her … when it comes to her marriage, we are not hurrying. It was not easy to send her for engineering working in small jobs. Usually people have to shell out lakhs of rupees for admissions. But because of her luck and her hard work she got a place in engineering. We were worried whether we could find a good boy for her. Since she is studying and if she finds a job we don't have to worry about her. When children start living their own lives parents feel very happy."

It is clear that Keerthi's parents are in no hurry to get her married and her mother feels that she would like Keerthi to find a job and only look for a suitable boy after she has settled into a job for two to three years. She says that she has told Keerthi that:

> "We [will] marry her to whomever she likes after she gets a job. I explained to her that she should find a person who will take care of her and love her. We are going through so many problems, and she won't be able to get adjusted to such problems. … I also said that she should select her life partner and inform us."

The trust and confidence Keerthi's mother has in her seem to be in sharp contrast to the way other parents relate to their children. Another mother expressed the huge pressure most parents are under to marry their daughters off at a young age:

> "Parents are worried that all the prices will keep increasing year by year. Some people just want to have the wedding since they have only one son or one daughter and want to see them settled. Or some boys may become troublesome and their parents want to arrange the marriage so that he will settle down. … When the girl becomes disobedient, they say that they have to get her married off at some point, so why not marry her off now? … There are many such reasons for an early marriage."

As Keerti's case study shows, the right kind of support can enable girls to have some autonomy and choice in their future.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

It is clear that various factors, such as location, caste, socio-economic status, educational level and aspirations, parental education and social norms, intersect to direct the trajectory of girls into child and early marriage or continued education. As pointed out by UNFPA (2012), reaching puberty should mark the beginning of a gradual transition to a healthy and productive adulthood. Instead, for many girls, puberty marks accelerating progress towards inequality and into the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Child marriage during adolescence can send girls into a downward spiral, with long-term consequences, by hindering and curtailing their transition from childhood to adulthood, although in some cases it can be an escape into a better life. All too often, however, deeply entrenched gender discrimination and social norms put adolescent girls at risk of violence, compromising their safe and healthy transition from childhood to adulthood. It is therefore important to recognise adolescence as a stage when key investments and effective support systems can set girls on a path towards empowerment.

Understanding and learning more about how aspirations, determination, self-efficacy and agency support certain girls and their families to challenge existing customs and social norms is critical to decrease child marriage, which promotes existing patriarchy and gender discrimination. Therefore gathering evidence about which enablers support girls in pursuing and realising their aspirations is necessary. Our data highlight a few promising domains:

- **Secondary schooling Is key to delaying child marriage.** In light of the fact that 89 per cent of the girls in our sample who completed senior secondary education, remained single at 19 years of age, it is evident that institutions such as elementary and secondary schools have a critical role to play in giving girls more autonomy and agency. Universalisation of secondary education, with safe transport to and from schools and expansion of residential facilities at secondary and higher education level, is critical to ensure that girls are allowed the opportunity to continue education, particularly when the socio-economic conditions of households pull them into child labour.

- **Build agency and educational aspirations.** The curriculum in schools, as well as adolescent programmes such as Bet Bachao Beti Padhao and Rashtriya Kishori Shakti Karyakram, must be tailored to encourage problem-solving, decision-making and critical thinking skills and provide support for young girls to identify opportunities and pursue career pathways. Broader efforts are required to ensure that schools adequately serve and empower all girls at risk of child marriage and also provide opportunities to help married girls to continue at school or return to it.

- **Address persisting gender discrimination.** To build long-lasting change it is imperative to recognise the importance of addressing existing gender norms that discriminate against girls and shape their identity and aspirations from birth. This will only become a reality if we work and collaborate with women, men and boys to challenge these gender norms, which put a higher value on boys and encourage parents not to invest in educating a girl because she is viewed as *paraya dhan* or belonging to someone else. Girls will require support from significant others within and outside the family to realise their full potential. It is very important to build a

communication strategy across the country, focusing on context-specific customs and norms that propagate gender inequality and aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviours of communities at large.

- **Build a campaign against the practice of dowry.** Since dowry continues to have a negative impact on both girls and boys, and the latter often have to take out large loans to pay for their sisters' marriages, and is a major cause of girls being married to the first male who makes 'reasonable demands', it is critical to build a campaign against this practice. 'Dowry-free blocks and districts' should be declared and celebrated in the country.

- **Target the poorest and rural households.** Given that 45 per cent of girls in the poorest tercile in our sample had teen marriages as compared to 24 per cent in the least poor tercile and that 42 per cent of the married girls lived in rural areas, policy attention must be given to developing targeted schemes to promote the empowerment of the most vulnerable groups of girls living in the poorest households, particularly in rural areas. Expansion of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and crop insurance will provide the poorest families with the means to retain children in schools and not pull them into paid work from an early age.

- **Engage communities and young men and boys.** Given that parents and siblings have such a key role in determining when a girl gets married, it is important to change current mindsets, which see the future role of girls as being limited to that of 'wives, daughters and mothers', and to use positive role models in the community to influence prevailing notions of entrenched patriarchy.

- **Enforcement of existing laws within an enabling environment.** It is important that existing laws to curb girls getting married during adolescence are enforced within an enabling framework, so that all avenues – legal, economic and political – support young girls and ensure that they are provided the opportunity to achieve their full potential. Structural barriers need to be identified and culturally appropriate systems evolved that support smooth transitions of girls from secondary schools and higher education into the job market. Only if girls become financially independent will they be able to take crucial decisions that affect their entire future, such as choosing their marriage partner.

As we move towards launching the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, it is critical that stakeholders such as the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) and the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, as well as the Ministry of Human Resource Development and local and legal institutions such as Panchayati Raj Institutions[10] and Child Protection Committees, work with communities and young adolescents to prevent child marriages, which stifle and end childhood by imposing adult responsibilities on young shoulders. The MWCD proposed a National Strategy on Child Marriage in 2013 and has suggested links with the Integrated Child Protection Scheme structures and statutory bodies to ensure detection and prompt referral of cases that require care and protection, not least girls who are already married. Unless a multi-pronged approach to address persisting practices such as dowry, as well as gender norms that devalue girls, is adopted, girls from

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[10] Decentralised governance mechanism at village level.

the poorest and most socially disadvantaged households will continue to be left out of the development agenda and to fail to attain their full potential.

Changing traditionally held norms is both challenging and slow, but we can already see evidence of changes, for instance in the way mothers are trying to find ways to give their daughters a better life. All stakeholders must join hands in this endeavour to break the negative cycle and must support each other's efforts to challenge destructive gender stereotypes.

Despite not attending school herself, Sarada's mother says that she sent her two daughters to school, because they should:

> "… have a better life than me. After so many problems and so much suffering I reached this stage. Why should they go through the suffering like me? Times have changed for better. Things are better now. There are many opportunities to earn money. They are much smarter than me. … My days are spent soaking wet in the rain, and under the blazing sun. Can they do that? Our life was led like an animal in the wilderness. I want my daughters to live happily and comfortably."

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Factors Shaping Trajectories to Child and Early Marriage: Evidence from Young Lives in India

The 2011 Census in India reported that nearly 17 million children between the ages of 10 and 19 –6% of the age group – are married, with girls constituting the majority (76 per cent), although there has been a significant relative reduction in the marriage of girls under 14. The aim of this paper is to better understand the individual, household and community factors that explain the different pathways to marriage among Young Lives children, drawing upon both descriptive statistics from the household survey as well as in-depth qualitative research with the study children.

The paper finds that secondary education, not being involved in paid work at age 12, high aspirations among mothers and daughters towards completing higher education, and parental education levels are all factors that are associated with delaying child and early marriage. On the other hand, poverty, caste, and rural location emerge as factors that are drivers of teen marriage. Girls from the poorest wealth tercile were 2.4 times more likely to be married by 19 than girls from least-poor families and girls in rural areas 2.3 times more likely to be married than girls in urban areas. Patriarchy and gendered social norms remains one of the drivers of early marriage, and dowry was paid by all families with 40 per cent paying more than one lakh Rupees (100,000), leaving the girl's family burdened with loans.

It is critical that stakeholders such as the Ministry of Women and Child Development work with statutory bodies such as the Integrated Child Protection Scheme to ensure detection and prompt referral of cases of girls who require care and protection. Together they must work towards implementing the 2013 National Strategy on the Prevention of Child Marriage. This will require close collaboration with Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Human Resource Development and as well as with legal institutions such as Child Protection Committees and most importantly local communities. Unless a multi-pronged approach to address persisting practices such as dowry as well as gender norms that devalue girls are not addressed, girls from the poorest and socially disadvantaged households will continue to be left out of the development agenda and be prevented from attaining their full potential.

Young Lives