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Transition to marriage and parenthood among youth in Andhra Pradesh

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Delaying the transition to marriage and parenthood among young people has been a policy and programme priority for several years in India. For example, several national level policies formulated since 2000, including the National Population Policy-2000, the National Youth Policy 2003 and the National Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health Strategy have advocated special programme attention to delay age at marriage and age at first birth.

Despite these commitments, substantial proportions of girls continue to marry in adolescence in India. As recently as in 2005–2006, more than two-fifths (47%) of women aged 20–24 were married by 18 years nationally. Likewise, over one-fifth (22%) of women aged 20–24 had given birth before age 18 and two-fifths (42%) before age 20. While the magnitude of early marriage and childbearing has been widely documented, far less is known about the extent to which young people are involved in planning their marriage, how prepared they are for married life and the nature of their married life.

This policy brief documents the magnitude of early marriage and early childbearing in Andhra Pradesh and sheds light on young people’s involvement in marriage-related planning and preparedness for married life, and the nature of married life.

The study
Data are drawn from the Youth in India: Situation and Needs study, a sub-nationally representative study undertaken for the first time in India of key transitions experienced by young people in six states of India. The study included a representative survey of young people in both rural and urban settings. Respondents included unmarried women and men and married women aged 15–24 and, in view of the paucity of married men in these ages, married men aged 15–29. In Andhra Pradesh, the survey was conducted in 2007–08. A total of 8,330 married and unmarried young men and women were interviewed in the survey. These included 1,405 married young men, 2,077 unmarried young men, 2,330 married young women and 2,518 unmarried young women. This brief is based on data obtained from the sample of married young men and women.

Child marriage continues to mark the lives of young women
Youth Study findings underscore that child marriage continues to characterise the lives of young women in the state. Of those aged 20–24, one-fifth (18%) were married before age 15, over half (54%) before age 18 and almost three-quarters (72%) before age 20. Young women in rural areas were almost three times as likely as urban young women to be married before age 15 (22% compared to 8%) and almost twice as likely to be married before age 18 (63% compared to 34%).

Early marriage was far less prevalent among young men than young women. Even so, one-tenth (11%) of young men aged 20–24 years was married in adolescence, that is, before age 20. Young men in rural areas were twice as likely as their urban counterparts to have married before age 20. In total, moreover, as many as one-fifth (19%) of young men aged 21–24 were married before the legal minimum age at marriage of 21, ranging from 10% among those in urban areas to 23% among those in rural areas.

Age at marriage: Percentage of young women and men aged 20–24 who were married before selected ages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age at Marriage</th>
<th>Young Women (20-24)</th>
<th>Young Men (20-24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below age 15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below age 18</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below age 20</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below age 21*</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below age 21*</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below age 21*</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below age 21*</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Among those aged 21-24.
Of note is the striking difference in the proportion of young people married before the legal minimum age at marriage by years of schooling completed by young women and men. Eight in ten young women with no formal schooling were married before age 18. The proportion of young women married before the legal age declined to 44% among those who had some secondary education and 5% among those who had completed at least 12 years of schooling. Among young men, the proportion marrying before the legal age declined from 40% among those with no formal schooling to 4% among those who had completed at least 12 years of schooling.

Differences by religion were modest among young women. Among young men, however, Muslims were less likely than others to have married below the legal minimum age at marriage. For example, 13% of young Muslim men, compared to 20–26% of young Hindu men and those from other religions had married before the legal minimum age of 21. Caste-wise differences suggest that young women and men belonging to general castes were much less likely, and those belonging to scheduled tribes much more likely, than others to have married before the legal age.

Youth involvement in planning their marriage is not universal
Almost all youth (93–95%), whether male or female, had married a partner chosen by their parents. Large proportions (86–89%) of married young men and women reported that their parents had sought their approval while determining their spouse-to-be; however, fewer were consulted with regard to the timing of their marriage, and gender differences were wide. Two in three married young men (68%) reported that their parents had consulted them on the timing of their marriage. In contrast, just one in five married young women (21%) was consulted on the timing of their marriage.

Few young people have opportunities to get to know their spouse-to-be before marriage
Just 29% of married young men and 19% of married young women reported that they had ever had a chance to meet and interact with their spouse-to-be alone prior to marriage. Indeed, as many as 43–44% of young men and women reported that they had met their spouse for the first time on the wedding day. Moreover, just 29% of young men and 15% of young women reported that they were aware at the time of their marriage of what to expect of married life. And more than half of young women (53%)—with little variation between those in rural and urban settings—compared to just 7% of young men reported that they had been scared about getting married.
Marital life is marked by considerable violence. Findings highlight that marital life was marked by considerable violence. Almost one-quarter of married young women (23%) reported the experience of some form of physical violence within marriage. Slightly fewer married young men—20%—reported the perpetration of physical violence on their wife. For 7% of married young women, the experience of physical violence took place within the first year of marriage itself, and somewhat more married young men (10%) reported perpetrating physical violence within the first year of marriage.

Fewer young women reported having experienced sexual violence than physical violence within marriage. Over the course of their marital lives, one in ten young women reported the experience of forced sex within marriage, and 6% had experienced forced sex at initiation itself. In contrast, a somewhat larger proportion of married young men admitted perpetrating violence on their wife: 15% reported that they had ever perpetrated forced sex within marriage and 8% reported that they had done so the first time sexual relations were experienced.

Communication about and practice of contraceptive methods

Communicating about contraceptive methods is limited. Youth Study findings indicate that relatively few youth communicated with their spouse about contraception, and, correspondingly, few had practised contraception at any time during marital life. For example, just 12% of young men and one-third of young women (34%) reported that they had ever discussed contraception with their spouse. Moreover, just 10% of young men, and 23% of young women reported ever use of contraceptive methods. It is notable that despite the young age of our sample, the method most likely to be used was female sterilisation, reported by 6% of young men and 18% of young women, a finding that may be attributed to the skewed focus of the family welfare programme in the state on terminal methods.

At the time of the interview, 8% of young men and 21% of young women were practising contraception. Findings, moreover, indicate that the practice of contraception to delay the first pregnancy was rare, reported by just 2–3% of young men and women.

Violence within marriage: Percentage of young men who experienced violence perpetrated by their husband

Violence within marriage: Percentage of young women who experienced violence perpetrated by their husband

Perhaps because of the widespread reliance on sterilisation rather than non-terminal methods of contraception, large minorities of married young men and women reported a mistimed or unwanted last pregnancy. Indeed, 15% of young men whose wife had ever became pregnant and almost one-quarter (23%) of young women who had ever became pregnant reported that their last pregnancy was mistimed or unwanted.

Childbearing in adolescence is extremely common. The pressure to prove fertility as soon as possible after marriage is experienced by considerable proportions of married youth and childbearing in adolescence is extremely common in the state. Among married young women aged 18 or above who were cohabiting with their husband at the time of the interview, three-fifths (58%) had their first pregnancy before age 18. Among married young men who were cohabiting with their wife and whose wife was aged 18 or above, almost two-fifths (38%) reported that their wife had her first pregnancy before age 18.

In addition, findings suggest that childbearing occurs soon after marriage. For example, among married men and women who had cohabited for 12 months or more and for whom age at first pregnancy was known, 57% of young men and 66% of young women reported that the first pregnancy occurred within a year of marriage.

Utilisation of maternal health services is not universal. The large majority of youth reported institutional delivery (72–76%) and skilled attendance (89–90%)
at the time of the first birth. As expected, the situation was better in urban than rural areas, but differences were not wide: for example, 86% of young women in urban areas had experienced their first delivery in a health facility, compared to 73% of young women in rural areas, and 95% compared to 87%, respectively, reported skilled attendance at first delivery.

Programme recommendations

While child marriage is particularly evident among young women, it is notable that in Andhra Pradesh, significant proportions of young men too have married below the legal minimum age at marriage for males. Findings call for multi-pronged efforts to eliminate the practice of early marriage among young men and women, and support newly-wed young women.

Mobilise communities to eliminate the practice of early marriage

Strategies are needed that mobilise communities to help parents resist pressures that foster the practice of early marriage, and to establish new norms and practices with regard to marriage. Community mobilisation efforts must involve youth themselves, their families, as well as influential persons in the community, including religious and political leaders.

Enforce existing laws on the age at marriage

Equally important is to ensure greater commitment on the part of law enforcement agencies to enforce existing laws on the minimum age at marriage and the registration of marriages, and to levy penalties on violators. Allowing anonymous reporting, making law enforcement agencies and others aware that the practice of early marriage is not a minor violation, and making the guidelines for penalties clear to enforcement agencies and the wider community are possible steps in this direction.

Provide girls with viable alternatives to early marriage

Efforts to delay marriage also require providing girls with viable alternatives to early marriage in the form of accessible and quality schooling, and opportunities to build and use livelihood skills. Working with the education sector to make schooling for girls more accessible, and to make classrooms gender-sensitive and responsive to the needs of girls and the concerns of their parents is important. At the same time, it is necessary to provide livelihood training within and outside the educational system and to provide those out-of-school a second chance at education.

Work with parents

Parents must be apprised of the need to involve children in marriage-related decisions and enable them to interact with their prospective spouse prior to the wedding day. Evidence that many young women approached marriage with fear, and that many youth reported that they were unprepared for their marriage calls for parents to ensure that their children are appropriately informed and counselled prior to marriage. Parents must also be made aware of the fact that early marriage compromises young women’s lives and reproductive health and choices in multiple ways.

Support newly-weds

Programmes are needed that inform youth about their pregnancy postponement options and enable them to access appropriate contraception. At the same time, providers must be trained and given the responsibility of reaching married young women and men—including those who have not yet experienced pregnancy—with information regarding contraception and other reproductive health matters as well as contraceptive supplies.

Findings that not all young women experienced institutional delivery highlight that reproductive and child health programmes in the state need to redouble efforts to universalise access to maternal health services among young people.

Efforts are needed, at the same time, that address the empowerment needs of married young women, enable young women to have greater control over their life, break down barriers that inhibit couple communication about sensitive matters, and encourage negotiation and conflict management skills early in marriage.

There exist many policies and programmes—be they related to women and child development, youth or health and family welfare—that have recognised the importance of preventing early marriage and improving sexual and reproductive health and choice among young people, and that have widely acknowledged the special vulnerabilities of young women. What is needed now is ensuring that programmes in Andhra Pradesh do indeed reach young people and the influential adults in their lives, and that promising lessons are assimilated and scaled up.