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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, early marriage and childbearing continue to characterise the life of women in India, and the pace of decline in child marriage and early childbearing has been slow. While these aspects of marriage and childbearing have 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 India 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, namely, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. These states were purposively selected to represent the different geographic and socio-cultural regions within the country, and these six states together represent two-fifths of the country’s population. 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.

The surveys in the six states were undertaken in a phased manner and took place between January 2006 and April 2008. A total of 50,848 married and unmarried young men and women were interviewed in the survey. These included 8,052 married young men, 11,522 unmarried young men, 13,912 married young women and 17,362 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 India. Of those aged 20–24, one-fifth of young women (19%) were married before age 15, half (49%) before age 18 and two-thirds (67%) before age 20. Young women in rural areas were four times as likely as urban young women to be married before age 15 (25% compared to 6%) and more than twice as likely to be married before age 18 (59% compared to 26%).
Early marriage was far less prevalent among young men than young women. Even so, one-sixth (16%) of young men aged 20–24 years was married in adolescence, that is, before age 20. Young men in rural areas were three times as likely as their urban counterparts to have married before age 20. In total, moreover, as many as one-fourth (26%) of young men aged 21–24 were married before the legal minimum age at marriage of 21, ranging from 13% among those in urban areas to 33% among those in rural areas.

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 (82%) were married before age 18. The proportion of young women married before the legal age declined to 35% 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 50% among those with no formal schooling to 12% among those who had completed at least 12 years of schooling.

Also notable are differences by economic status of young people’s households, as measured by wealth quintiles (with the first quintile representing households of the lowest wealth status and the fifth quintile representing households of the highest wealth status). The proportion of young women and men marrying before the legal age declined steadily with household economic status.

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

![Graph showing the percentage of young women and men married before selected ages.]

*Among those aged 21–24.

Percentage of young women aged 20–24 who were married before the legal minimum age at marriage, according to selected characteristics

![Graph showing the percentage of young women married before the legal minimum age at marriage, by years of schooling, wealth quintile, and caste.]

Years of schooling: None, 1–7, 8–11, 12 and above
Wealth quintile: First quintile, Second quintile, Third quintile, Fourth quintile, Fifth quintile
Caste: ST/SC, OBC, General
Caste-wise differences suggest that young women and men belonging to general castes were much less likely, and those belonging to scheduled tribes more likely, than others to have married before the legal age.

State-wise differences were also notable. Among young women, those from Tamil Nadu were least likely, and those from Bihar most likely, to marry before age 18 (18% and 77%, respectively). In addition, one-third of young women from Maharashtra (35%) and 54–62% of those from Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh were married before age 18. Among young men, those from Maharashtra and the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu were less likely than their northern counterparts, that is, Bihar, Jharkhand and Rajasthan to marry before age 21 (8–19% versus 33–46%).

Youth involvement in planning their marriage is limited
Almost all youth, whether male or female, had married a partner chosen by their parents. Just 5–6% of young men and women had chosen their partner on their own. The majority—84% of young men and 70% of young women—reported that their parents had arranged their marriage, but had sought their approval while determining their marriage partner. In contrast, one-tenth of young men (11%) and one-quarter of young women reported that their parents had arranged their marriage, but had not sought their approval at all. Youth in the northern states were more likely than those in Maharashtra...
and the southern states to report that their marriage was arranged without their approval (11–22% versus 6–7% among young men; 41–47% versus 3–10% among young women).

Moreover, far fewer were consulted with regard to the timing of their marriage, and gender differences were wide. Just over two in five married young men (45%) and one in five married young women (20%) reported that their parents had consulted them on the timing of their marriage.

Findings also show that the large majority of youth—70% of young men and 78% of young women—reported that they were unaware at the time of their marriage of what to expect of married life. Moreover, almost half of young women (47%) compared to just 6% of young men reported that they had been scared about getting married.

Communication between spouses is limited
Findings suggest that spousal communication, even on such topics as spending money, number of children they would like to have and contraception, was not universal. In total, 87–88% reported regularly discussing how to spend money and 79–84% reported having discussed whether and when to have a baby. Discussion was more limited on the topic of contraception, and notably, fewer young men (34%) than women (55%) reported that they had ever discussed contraception with their spouse.

Marital life is marked by considerable violence
Findings highlight that marital life was marked by considerable violence. One-quarter of married young women (25%) reported the experience of some form of physical violence within marriage. A similar percentage of married young men—24%—reported the perpetration of physical violence on their wife. Youth in Rajasthan were less likely than those in the other states to report having ever experienced or perpetrated physical violence. For example, 18% of young
women in Rajasthan compared to 23–30% of those in the other states reported that they had ever experienced physical violence at the hands of their husband. Likewise, one in seven young men in Rajasthan (14%) compared to between one-fifth and one-third of young men in the remaining five states (20–34%) reported having ever perpetrated physical violence on their wife.

For one in ten married young women, the experience of physical violence took place within the first year of marriage itself, and a similar percentage of married young men (11) reported perpetrating physical violence within the first year of marriage.

Far more young women reported having experienced sexual violence than physical violence within marriage. Over the course of their marital lives, one in three young women (32%) reported the experience of forced sex within marriage, and one in four (27%) had experienced forced sex at initiation itself. In contrast, fewer married young men admitted perpetrating violence on their wife: 17% reported that they had ever perpetrated forced sex within marriage and 10% reported that they had done so the first time sexual relations were experienced. State-wise differences were evident among both young men and women. Among young women, those in the northern states were more likely than those in Maharashtra and the southern states to have experienced forced sex within marriage at initiation (33–49% versus 6–23%) and at any time during their married life (40–54% versus 10–27%). Among young men, similarly, those in the northern states were considerably more likely than those in Maharashtra and the southern states to report that they had perpetrated forced sex on their wife at sexual initiation (13–15% versus 4–8%) and over their married life (17–25% versus 9–15%).

Contraceptive use within marriage is limited
Youth Study findings indicate that few youth had practised contraception at any time during marital life. For example, just a quarter of young men and women reported ever use of contraceptive methods. Methods most likely to have been reported by both young men and women were condoms (reported by 16% of young men and 9% of young women), oral pills (reported by 7% of young men and 5% of young women), and, despite the young age of female respondents, female sterilisation (reported by 5% and 9% of young men and women, respectively).

At the time of the interview, almost one in five young men and women (18%) were practising contraception. Among young men, those from Maharashtra and Rajasthan were more likely than those in the other states to report that they were practising contraception at the time of the interview (24–32% versus 8–16%); among young women, in contrast, those from Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh were more likely than others to so report (21% versus 12–17%).
Findings, moreover, indicate that the practice of contraception to delay the first pregnancy was rare, reported by just 12% of young men and 5% of young women.

Utilisation of maternal health services is limited
Findings suggest that despite the early age at first pregnancy, utilisation of maternal health services by young women was limited. For example, just 47–54% of youth reported that the first delivery took place in a health care facility. Rural-urban differences were pronounced: 72–78% of youth in urban areas, compared to just 40–47% in rural areas, reported an institutional delivery. Skilled attendance at first delivery was also limited, reported by just two-thirds of youth (68%). Youth in Maharashtra and the southern states were more likely than those in the other states to report both skilled attendance (78–93% versus 42–63% among young men; 82–94% versus 35–61% among young women) and institutional delivery (50–81% versus 23–39% among young men; 62–84% versus 25–45% among young women).

Childbearing in adolescence is common
The pressure to prove fertility as soon as possible after marriage is experienced by considerable proportions of married youth. Among married men and women who had cohabited for 12 months or more and for whom age at first pregnancy was known, two-thirds (66–67%) reported that the first pregnancy occurred within a year of marriage.

Findings, moreover, highlight that childbearing in adolescence is common in the country. Among married young women aged 18 or above who were cohabiting with their husband at the time of the interview, almost half (47%) 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, one-third (35%) reported that their wife had her first pregnancy before age 18.

Programme recommendations
While child marriage is particularly evident among young women, it is notable that 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 minimum 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.

**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.

**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.

**Address the social vulnerability of newly-wed young women**

Findings on the multiple vulnerabilities faced by married young women underscore the need for programmes that support newly-wed young women, acknowledging that their situation and needs may differ from those of married adults. Efforts are needed that address the empowerment needs of married young women, enable young women to have greater control over resources, break down the social isolation they experience and encourage couple communication, negotiation and conflict management skills early in marriage.

**Support newly-weds to postpone the first pregnancy and promote pregnancy-related care among first-time pregnant young women**

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, moreover, highlight that reproductive and child health programmes in the country need to build a demand for, as well as improve the availability of, maternal health services among young people.

**Implement state-specific programmes to prevent early marriage and address the needs of married youth**

Findings have highlighted regional differences not only in terms of early marriage, but also in terms of other
dimensions of the marriage process and married life, for example, marriage-related decision-making, contraception, childbearing and utilisation of maternal health services. These findings underscore the need for programmes that are state-specific and responsive to the particular obstacles youth face in making a safe transition to marriage and parenthood in each state.

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 these programmes do indeed reach young people and the influential adults in their lives, that programmes are responsive to the particular vulnerabilities of youth in different geographic settings and that promising lessons are assimilated and scaled up.