Child Marriage and the Right to Education: Evidence from an Ongoing Study in Rural Gujarat, India

Evidence Submitted to the United Kingdom All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health

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Executive Summary

This submission analyzes the complex causal relationship between early marriage and female adolescent school dropout in India. The evidence is informed by the findings of an ongoing research project led by Jacqueline Bhabha, the Director of Research at the François Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University. Founded in 1992 through a gift from the Association François-Xavier Bagnoud, the FXB Center works to protect and promote the rights and well-being of young people in extreme circumstances worldwide. The Center uses an interdisciplinary health and human rights lens to build a conceptual and empirical basis for realizing rights inherent in protection of children and empowerment of adolescents and youth trapped throughout the world in grave poverty and deprivation, harsh oppression, major disaster, and war. Through research, teaching, advocacy and targeted action, our work focuses on changing the modes and structures which continue to consign children and adolescents throughout the world to conditions of oppression, abuse, exploitation, and exclusion.

More Indian children are in primary school today than ever before. In part this reflects a substantial Government of India investment in programmatic reform focused on primary school access and performance\(^1\). By contrast, a clear path through second-level education still eludes the vast majority of Indian adolescents, particularly those from socioeconomically deprived, rural backgrounds. Only one in ten young Indian women attend third-level education, despite the fact that nine out of ten girls enroll at the primary level, which is the result of a combination of supply and demand factors, including familial poverty, restrictive gender roles, and an overburdened and under-resourced public infrastructure. Adolescent girls from poor, rural backgrounds are the most likely to be out of school and also at high risk of early marriage, with 53% of rural women getting married before the legal age of 18 (Moore 2009). Studies have shown that parents' preference for girls' early marriage is a contributing factor to early school leaving (Shahid 2007), and, conversely, that participation in education raises the marriage age and reduces fertility rates (Lewis and Lockheed 2006).

Preliminary data demonstrate the intransigence of obstacles that poor, rural girls face at all stages of their education. Early marriage and the narrow classification of adolescent girls’ potential on the basis of their marriage prospects seriously impact girls’ ability to access their right to education. Married children are 2.11 (and engaged children 1.95) times more likely not to be in school than single children. Concern over girls’ reputations and a narrow definition of future life prospects after marriage contribute to the early termination of adolescent girls’ schooling. Child marriage, then, is correlated with serious educational disadvantage and has knock on effects on future employment opportunity and financial security.

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\(^1\) Big strides have been made towards improving educational provisions and achieving gender parity at primary school level in India through the Government’s implementation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). SSA is the Indian government’s flagship program for the timely achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE), as mandated by the 86th amendment to the Constitution of India which makes free and compulsory education for children between 6-14 years age group a fundamental right.
Background

Early marriage has been linked with low educational attainment, poor health outcomes for offspring, low maternal social status in husbands’ families, compromised reproductive control, and high rates of maternal mortality and marital violence (Jensen & Thornton 2003, Raj et al 2010). International and domestic laws and policies to halt the practice have been widely enacted. Yet the phenomenon is still widespread in many parts of the developing world, including India. Nearly half—45%—of young women in India marry before the legal age of 18, and this figure rises to 53% in rural areas. By the age of 20, 63% of Indian women marry (Moore 2009).

Several factors compound the vulnerability of the child bride’s position. Grooms are, on average, six years older than brides (IIPS 2007) and age differences are significantly greater for child brides. More than 90% of newly married couples in India live with the groom’s parents immediately after marriage, and an incoming daughter-in-law is expected to conform to the lifestyle of a new family (Desai 2010). Marriage also usually leads relatively quickly to childbearing, given pressure, largely exerted by mothers-in-law through their sons, for a young bride to get pregnant (Barua and Kurz 2008).

In contemporary India, formal education has so far proved to be the most effective mechanism for enhancing female empowerment. It is also the most important determinant of the timing of marriage (Clark et al 2006). But legislation alone does not improve educational access or performance. Cultural expectations and perceptions surrounding the overarching importance of marriage continue to negatively affect girls’ educational prospects. Based on a 376 household survey, focus groups and key informant interviews across five rural villages in North Western Gujarat, this submission provides evidence that early marriage and the narrow classification of adolescent girls as future wives seriously impacts girls’ ability to access their right to education.

Project Overview

The François Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University has been conducting research on the circumstances of rural adolescent girls in the northwestern state of Gujarat, India since June 2010. The study undertaken in collaboration with the Indian Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) documents the factors impinging on educational access for adolescents, including early marriage, negative gender norms, and poor infrastructure in five rural villages.

Methodology

Jensen and Thornton (2003) provide a recent overview of these patterns worldwide.
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The research began with an in-depth community assessment using a quantitative survey and qualitative components, randomly targeting adolescents and female caregivers across five villages. The villages were selected using a non-random purposive sample. They were chosen by SEWA, on the basis of strong village population membership within the association, the villages’ proximity to one another, and the relative accessibility of the villages to the association’s local headquarters.

A convenience sample was collected using lists of households with adolescents provided by the village administration. A total of 376 adolescents were selected, stratified by age group (10-13 and 14-17) and gender into even subsamples of 94 each. In households with adolescents, 376 caregivers, 95% of whom were female, completed the caregiver’s questionnaire. Samples were weighted per village proportional to population. A total of 752 people participated in the survey providing more extensive data on personal experiences and opinions. With caregivers reporting on all members of the household, background and demographic information was collected on a total of 2102 subjects. In January 2011, the team returned to the villages to disseminate the survey results and to carry out interviews with teachers and focus groups composed of adolescent girls in school, not in school, and their mothers. The focus group provided further insight into the daily lives of adolescent girls and the barriers they face accessing education.

Child Marriage and Educational Attainment

In this study, the intricate relationship between child marriage and educational attainment was found to be a determining factor in these adolescent girls’ futures.

The prevalence of marriage and engagement was far higher among young women than men. As Figure 1 illustrates, of the girls aged 14-17, 37% were engaged and 12% married, as opposed to only 27% and 3% of the boys aged 14-17 respectively.

Figure 1 Marital Status of Children 6-17 in the Household

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Engaged</th>
<th>Single</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 6-13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 14-17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys 6-13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys 14-17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 97.19% of the families sampled were members of the organization.
4 The village census lists were obtained from local Aganwadis. These are government-sponsored preschool facilities for children aged 0-6. The facilities provide health check-ups, clean water, clean toilets and a learning environment for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. In these particular communities, the Aganwadis, in conjunction with the village Gram Panchayat, keep annually updated census information on the villagers.
Marital status among adolescents is associated with school attendance rates: 78.32% of single children were attending school compared to 48.28% of married children. Married children were 2.11 (and engaged children 1.95) times more likely not to be in school than single children. Marriage also constrains girls’ lives more than boys: only 57% of married girls were enrolled in school compared to 80% of married boys.

### Restrictive Gender Expectations

The relatively large number of girls (23%) and boys (17%) engaged at or before the age of 13 confirms the continuing prevalence of “guana,” a practice whereby girls are promised in marriage yet may not live with their husbands until they have reached puberty and the marriage ceremony is consecrated. According to the International Institute for Population Sciences (2007), “guana” is generally found in poorer, more traditional Indian states where child marriages are a mark of prestige.

The focus groups conducted as part of the study confirmed the overriding importance of marriage as a source of girls’ social status. Interviewed girls evoked a sense of obligation and responsibility towards their families which superseded any personal ambitions for higher education or career.

> “Out of duty to her family members the girls are leaving the school early. It is much easier for parents if there is a girl to do household work.”

> “Once a girl reaches a certain age then she must care for her siblings and do her embroidery and go to the fields. It is a girl’s responsibility to her parents.”

Mothers placed their daughters in traditional female roles of serving the family. They appeared to value education as a tool to strengthen a girl in her roles as “daughter,” then “daughter-in-law,” “wife,” and “mother:”

> “If a daughter is educated, then she can also teach her mother, younger sister. My daughter keeps the financial accounts. But the problem is that she leaves for the-in-laws house.”

> “Yes, an educated daughter can give tuition at home, while grocery shopping she can handle the accounts.”

Another contributing factor to girls’ marginalization from the schooling system is the universal concern that mixed gender relationships damage the value of a daughter in the marriage market. It is difficult to find data on premarital sex, but studies indicate that less than 5% of women acknowledge having sex before marriage, and often this includes premarital sex with men they subsequently marry (Santhya and Jejeebhoy 2007). In practice, a girl does not even have to be sexually active to be labeled promiscuous. Simple contact and platonic friendships with the opposite sex can be enough to damage her reputation (Caldwell et al. 1983;
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Caldwell et al. 1998; Lindenbaum 1981). The influence of these factors emerged from the focus groups. A mother, asked how she would feel about her daughter attending school in another village, replied:

“When our daughter leaves for school or leaves to do work, we are afraid very much because the times are not good.”

A focus group with local adolescent girls also echoed this concern:

“There are girls from the village who went to school and then ran away and did not come back.”

“They think that once we leave the village we will have affairs with boys and marry them, so they won’t send us beyond the village to study.”

Conclusion

Education is a proven springboard for human development, creating the conditions for progress in health and gender equity (Schultz 1993, Klassen 1993, and Lewis and Lockheed 2006) and playing a key role in addressing other pressing global challenges such as climate change, food security, and peace building (UNESCO 2011). Though the far-reaching benefits of education are widely accepted, particularly in a technological age with a shrinking traditional job market, the challenge of realizing an equitable system against a developing world backdrop of growing inequalities, gender discrimination, entrenched social hierarchies and considerable resource constraints remains unresolved. Data from the FXB study clearly shows the continuing close correlation between early marriage and educational disadvantage, particularly for girls. Without stronger incentives to enhance the importance of respect for young girls’ right to education, and without tangible material benefits resulting from education, child marriage will continue to be a default choice for poor parents intent on safeguarding their children, and particularly their daughters’ future.
Bibliography


