

# EARLY AND CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA

*A Landscape Analysis*



NIRANTAR TRUST  
*Supported by American Jewish World Service*



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**COVER PHOTO** Sukhudi Murmur, age 16, avoided marriage at age 10 thanks to the support of Mohammad Bazar Backward Class Development Society (MBBCDS), an organization working to end early and child marriage in West Bengal, India. Sukhudi is now continuing her studies and lives in a hostel run by MBBCDS. *Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik*

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# *Executive Summary*

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This report provides an analytic overview of the landscape of early and child marriage in India, based on a study conducted in 2014 by Nirantar Trust with the support of American Jewish World Service (AJWS).

Nirantar conducted a thorough survey of the important work that has been done on this issue to-date, mapping the substantial investment over many years made by international funders, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations in India to implement strategies to end the practice. The researchers also took a critical look at these interventions and assessed both their strengths and limitations—identifying needs and opportunities for modified or additional investment.

Importantly, this landscape analysis approaches this issue from a feminist perspective, focusing on the way sociocultural norms about gender and sexuality shape the incidence and impact of the practice. The analysis also assesses interventions on the basis of whether they can successfully empower girls to achieve greater choice in the decisions that shape their futures.

This report aims to provide funders, NGOs, coalition partners and policymakers with insights and evidence from the field that they can use to shape discourse, make philanthropic investments and build programs focused on empowering girls and ending early and child marriage. With this roadmap—and with increased commitment in India and around the world—we believe that we can make a profound difference in this field.

## BACKGROUND

Early and child marriage has been a prevalent practice at different points in the history of almost all societies around the globe, including Europe, the United States and the Middle East. In India, the practice has origins going back to ancient times and persists today.

For more than 140 years, the Indian government and civil society have sought to curb the practice of early and child marriage through law. In 2006, the government renewed its efforts: India passed the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, which increased the penalties for conducting a child marriage ceremony, made a child marriage voidable by a married party up to two years after reaching the age of maturity, and provided the opportunity for courts to intervene in these cases. Furthermore, in response to the widely publicized rape case that happened in Delhi in 2012, the Indian government in 2013 increased the age of consent for sex to match the age of marriage (for women).

These legal frameworks reflect the government's and communities' concerns about the issue—but they are rarely implemented and have been insufficient in addressing an issue as complex and rooted in community practice as early and child marriage.

According to the most recent national survey commissioned by India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (2005-2006), 58 percent of girls marry before reaching the legal age of 18; 74 percent are married before reaching 20. The Indian government commissioned this research via the National Family Health Survey, which tracks health-related data trends throughout India over time.

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Although the data reveal the widespread nature of this practice, there is some reason for optimism, as they also show the incidence of extreme child marriage is dropping. The latest national representative data shows only 12 percent of Indian women who married before age 20 were younger than 15 at the time of marriage. There has been a gradual decline since the early 1990s in the proportion of women married by the ages of 15, 18 and 20 years.

These changes have influenced our terminology. The documented increase in the average age of marriage indicates that today this practice primarily affects adolescents and young people, whose needs are different from those of children. The term “early and child marriage” reflects these complexities and it is, therefore, the term the Nirantar team would prefer to use rather than “child marriage.”

The contemporary practice of early and child marriage in India is rooted in rigid societal norms and serves to bolster long-standing social inequalities and power structures. Marriage at a young age prevents both girls and boys from exercising agency in making important life decisions and securing basic freedoms, including pursuing opportunities for education, earning a sustainable livelihood and accessing sexual health and rights, among others. More broadly, early and child marriage reinforces existing inequalities between men and women and among different economic classes, castes, and religious and ethnic groups.

To fully understand the causes of early and child marriage and create solutions requires an in-depth understanding of issues of gender, education, sexuality, livelihood and culture. Each of the factors connected to early and child marriage cannot be understood in isolation. We must examine the various ways that they intersect and influence one another, and consider how they are further complicated by connections with socioeconomic factors related to caste, religion, poverty, migration and globalization.

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## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to understand the landscape of early and child marriage, the research team sought to address the following questions:

1. What are the demographics of incidence and prevalence of early and child marriage in India (by geographic area, socioeconomic status, ethnic identity and other factors?)
2. What are the factors that impact decision-making on early and child marriage? Who are the key actors involved in this process?
3. What are the root causes of early and child marriage? How do key players in the field understand these root causes?
4. Why do organisations work on early and child marriage? Why do they oppose it? What is their vision of desired change?
5. How do organisations approach early and child marriage? What are the strategies being adopted?
6. What are the gaps in existing interventions? What strategies have emerged as promising?
7. How can monitoring and evaluation around progress on the issue be done meaningfully?

## METHODOLOGY

Our research consisted of five components:

1. A review of the existing literature on early and child marriage, including key studies, academic articles, reports and policy documents.
2. Interviews with experts who have done extensive work on the issue of early and child marriage, including academics, practitioners and researchers. These informants strengthened our intellectual and theoretical base for this report and provided us with an overview of existing laws and government strategies and the shortcomings therein.
3. The theory of change developed by the research team (see annexure 4). This encompasses our understanding and articulation of the problem, based on feminist theories and experience working with communities, and our long-term goals, approaches and strategies, as guided by our observations in the field.
4. The collection of primary data from field visits to 19 organisations working on early and child marriage across seven states in India (Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and New Delhi). These field visits included semi-structured interviews, group interviews and focus-group discussions with adolescent girls and boys, women's collectives and fathers, as well as other actors such as teachers, police and government officials, religious leaders and the elected leaders of local *panchayats* (village-level bodies of self-governance). Nirantar also conducted extensive focus-group discussions with the staff of all 19 organisations.
5. Organizing a two-day National Consultation on Early and Child Marriage that involved more than 40 participants, including leaders from 38 organisations across the country. The consultation provided organisations with a space for honest conversations around their experiences and challenges working on the issue, their struggles with monitoring and evaluation, and their needs going forward.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Nirantar Trust is a centre for gender and education, founded in 1993 to enable girls and women from marginalised communities in India enjoy greater access to educational opportunities as a key to their empowerment. Nirantar works to increase the capacities of a wide range of actors—including community leaders, teachers, staff members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government programmes—as well as to create

educational materials and undertake research and advocacy toward empowerment through education. For the past seven years, Nirantar has worked with local organisations to strengthen their work with adolescents and women, and has focused on issues of adolescence and sexuality.

Nirantar has extensive experience carrying out participatory, multi-method research studies, with a strong focus on making recommendations for change. Work at the community level builds strong communication skills and a close understanding of the realities of the field, both essential for studying early and child marriage. One of the key limitations of existing research is the lack of emphasis on sexuality; even the few organisations that recognize the significance of sexuality have had difficulty creating honest discussions around sexuality, especially with girls who are shy to talk about marriage. This is an area of our expertise, with years of experience in breaking the silence around sexuality and in emphasising the need to recognize the links between the politics of gender and sexuality. As organisations with a holistic perspective, and experience working on education that is relevant to the lived realities of women and girls, we were well placed to study the landscape of early and child marriage in India.

## FINDINGS

Here we will share the key findings of the landscape analysis: first, the historical legacy of early and child marriage; second, our findings related to root causes and impacts; third, the key points of analysis emerging from the community-level interventions being undertaken by the NGOs that were studied. While many of these findings reaffirm the existing knowledge base on early and child marriage in India, several are new insights that we hope will inform the thinking of those working on this issue.

## HISTORICAL LEGACY

The practice of early and child marriage first came under examination following the colonization of India. European governments used it to justify their role in India as civilizers of “barbaric practices.” Despite a “mission to civilize,” the British government remained reluctant to intervene in the institution of marriage per se. Amid the growing nationalist movement in India, British officials felt such interventions would further fuel discontent. When approached by reformers, the British government limited their efforts to the sensational issues of early consummation and early pregnancy—the “immediate evils” of child marriage—rather than the long-range

consequences for society.<sup>1</sup> They went on to set a minimum age for consummation of marriage in 1891, skirting all other issues around child marriage.

This colonial legacy of focusing on age still shapes today’s discourse on early and child marriage. The obvious similarity of contemporary debates to the discourse from a century ago is hardly coincidental. We have inherited three important legacies in how we engage with the issue: narrow focuses on health, age and the law. These legacies have diverted attention from the role of women’s empowerment, issues of consent and choice beyond age, and the need to engage with early and child marriage as a social and political issue, rather than a purely legal or state-centric one. This is one of the reasons why political movements in post-independence India, particularly the women’s movement, have had limited engagement, if any, with early and child marriage.

*Internationally, as well as in India, there is a tendency to frame early and child marriage as a “native practice”—a problem that plagues the Global South; that plagues a different culture and less educated people; or that plagues “the other.” This representation strips the practice of all its underlying causes and complexities, which have resonance around the world, and are as relevant in the Global North as they are in the developing world.*

The discourse within the development sector continues to be stunted at many levels. Internationally, as well as in India, there is a tendency to frame early and child marriage as a “native practice”—a problem that plagues the Global South; that plagues a different culture and less educated people; or that plagues “the other.” This representation strips the practice of all its underlying causes and complexities (such as teenage pregnancies), which have resonance around the world, and are as relevant in the Global North as they are in the developing world. The key lesson from this history is that we must broaden today’s discourse and view early and child marriage differently from how it has been viewed in the past. The main difference, we argue, is to look at the practice as it relates to its structural root causes and engage critically with them, while keeping a focus on empowering young people to bring about positive social change central to this work. We will elaborate on this position with evidence in the following sections.

1 Forbes 1979.

## ROOT CAUSES

Early and child marriage is a symptom of a deeply fractured and unequal society. When asked why people decide to marry their children early, causes like “dowry,” “poverty” and “fear of sexual violence” are mentioned. While these may be factors that influence decision-making around marriage, they are not the root causes. The root causes are structural inequalities and direct decision-making factors; dowry and other such explanations are ultimately symptoms of those deeper problems. These underlying structures are an interplay of patriarchy, class, caste, religion and sexuality, which lead to complex realities that then influence decision-making.

In this report we identify seven root causes of early and child marriage: the economics of marriage; sexuality; gender norms and masculinity; educational and institutional gaps; the centrality of marriage; risk, vulnerability and uncertainty; and age as an axis of power. While some of these exist in the current discourse around the issue, others are additions made through this study.

### ECONOMICS OF MARRIAGE

Like so many aspects of our lives, marriage is in many ways an economic transaction, and all such transactions are governed by certain rules and assumptions. Norms around marriage transactions are governed by, and reproduce, inequalities. For example, patriarchal Indian society views women as an economic burden. Through marriage this burden is transferred to the marital family. Dowry is then expected from the girl's family as support for bearing this burden. For families that struggle with poverty, this one-time cost is very high, and the decision-making around a girl's marriage is done based on a desire to minimize this cost. Costs of weddings are viewed similarly, and multiple sisters may be married in one ceremony to capitalize on economies of scale.

Economic inequality and patriarchy are the fundamental assumptions behind the economics of marriage. This includes an unequal division of labour within the household, and the role of a woman's labour in decisions about her marriage. Patriarchy ensures the undervaluing of the young bride's labour within the economic transaction, skewing the bargaining power against the girl and her family. This is despite the fact that the productive capacities of the newly married young bride are central to the functioning of the household economy, as she is utilised for unpaid care work, while the rest of the family works in the fields or seeks paid employment.

## SEXUALITY

Control over women's sexuality is central to a society that is both patriarchal and divided by class and caste. These boundaries are kept in place by restricting women's sexuality and ability to procreate in order to limit inheritance of wealth and maintain “caste purity.” This places a premium on the virginity and chastity of young women, such that even a forced sexual encounter is seen as tarring the image of the woman, leaving her less worthy of marriage.

The overall attitude toward sexuality is negative, and there is no space to acknowledge adolescent sexuality and desires without being shamed or facing severe consequences. These attitudes mean that adolescents themselves don't see sex before marriage as an option and sometimes choose to marry young as a way to satisfy desires. Some adolescents find each other outside of arranged marriage set-ups and choose to elope, often at the cost of severing ties with their communities forever. But many others marry the person arranged by their parents in order to fulfil their desires without drastic repercussions. Since these norms create a rigid environment, parents who seek control—as well as young people who wish to exercise their sexual agency—have little choice but marriage.

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### GENDER NORMS AND MASCULINITY

Women are socialised to believe that their primary role in society is in relation to others—as a daughter, a daughter-in-law, a wife and a mother. These norms restrict women from having aspirations beyond marriage. Similarly, for men, gender norms are constructed around masculinity, and a man's sense of self hinges on his ability to control women, particularly daughters. Until the daughter is married, her protection and chastity is considered a marker of the father's honour and masculinity. Losing control over his daughter can bring a man shame and exclusion from the community, and this motivates men to marry their girls off early.

Fathers of boys face similar dilemmas. Errant boys who stray from the norms of masculinity are married early as a way for the father to reinforce control over the son, by foisting the additional responsibilities of a wife and children on him. This increased dependency of the son on his father ensures that the son and his wife obey orders within the household. The onus of disciplining not only himself but also his wife falls onto the young boy; if he fails, he may be forced to fend for himself. These patriarchal gender norms influence decision-making around marriage.

## **EDUCATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL GAPS**

For those parents who wish to send their daughters to school, and for girls who wish to study, accessing education is not always easy. Over and above restrictive norms, girls often have to travel long distances to find institutional education. Sometimes the lack of schools ends girls' education. A lack of institutions exaggerates the fact that a girl's education is viewed as a secondary priority to her labour in the household. It also reduces the bargaining power of young girls to resist marriage and to find alternative activities and aspirations.

Those who wish to continue their education are compelled to negotiate with their parents for this freedom. The trade-off for being "allowed" higher education is a greater conformity to the norms of a "good girl" who can be trusted to "do the right thing" and stay on the "right path," which usually implies that girls stay away from romantic relationships and cede control over other parts of their lives. In addition, the content and pedagogy of the mainstream educational system lacks any focus on girls' empowerment or other ideas that could help girls in their negotiations around marriage.

## **CENTRALITY OF MARRIAGE**

Across all social boundaries, marriage is considered to be the most important part of the lives of young people. Both men and women are encouraged to aspire to it from a young age, each in his or her own way. This centrality of marriage is also accompanied by specific norms around marriage. These norms dictate what is and is not an "ideal" marriage. Because social norms require everyone to marry, and because marriage is governed by rigid rules,

families fear that their child might not have an "ideal" marriage or will not find the "ideal" match. In such cases, marrying early is the way parents secure the future of their children. Indeed, marriage is so central that young adults are often eager for it as well. Some young people dream about "love marriages," of course. But for many others, marriage is a means to satisfy sexual desires or access the mobility and freedom reserved for adults; in addition, there is often a deep desire for the romance associated with the act and ritual of marriage itself. Often, the dreams of young people are limited to those that can be accessed through marriage.

## **RISK, VULNERABILITY AND UNCERTAINTY**

For the many families that live amid growing uncertainty, there is a strong anxiety about the future: a sense of "who knows what tomorrow will bring." Structural factors like poverty, agrarian crises and migration exacerbate the vulnerability of families to severe and life-changing situations. In such cases, marriage is seen as a way to bring certainty and insurance to an otherwise volatile environment. This is also why families that migrate, or are under threat of communal violence, or live in areas prone to floods or other natural disasters, are more likely to marry their children young—as a way to avoid greater uncertainty and as a way to mitigate risks by using marriage to strengthen social networks.

## **AGE AS AN AXIS OF POWER**

Young people, children particularly, are viewed as naïve and innocent and lacking the capacity to fend for themselves. This is why society creates mechanisms to protect them from harm. In many cases, this is the explanation used to separate young people marrying underage out of choice. However, the same is not as problematic when it takes place with parental consent, within societal norms and boundaries. This difference shows that young people lack agency not because they are unable to make good decisions. Instead, agency comes with age: those who are older generally have greater power over decision-making. Since age, and age difference, influence the way in which we engage with one another, age can be considered an axis across which young people are left disempowered from the decision-making process around marriage.

## IMPACTS

Early and child marriage creates a number of negative consequences for young adults and their families. Of these, the development sector currently focuses on two primary impacts: on education, as girls are forced to drop out of school; and on the health of young women, especially linked to early pregnancy. These two problems are essential to address, but there are other impacts that are also important. By looking at root causes, we gain a broader understanding of the impacts of early and child marriage on education and health, but also on gender and sexuality, and livelihoods.

*We visited 19 organisations and interacted with more than 50 others. The organisations were asked to articulate why early and child marriage is a problem; what their long-term goals are to solve it; how they wish to approach the issue; and what their strategies and the thematic areas in which they work are.*

A detailed discussion of impacts follows in the main report. Here, we explain why it is important to broaden the scope of the impacts in articulating the problem of early and child marriage, which will, in turn, affect the scope of long-term goals and strategies. By doing so, aspects of adolescents' lives that are invisible will come to the fore—for example, looking beyond early pregnancies will enable interventions to help young brides seek social support and livelihood opportunities after they are married. Currently, grassroots organisations that identify these gaps are unable to work on them because the larger discourse limits the scope of work on the issue.

## INTERVENTIONS

We visited 19 organisations and interacted with more than 50 others through interviews and the aforementioned national consultation around early and child marriage. Here we provide a broad landscape of the kinds of organisations working in the field. To be clear, there is enormous variety among these organisations; no two are alike. The structure of theory of change provides the framework for our analysis of these organisations. Below, we provide two different theories of change that exist on two extremes of the pool of diverse organisations in the field, one focused on age at marriage and the other focused on empowerment. No organisation fits solely into just one category, but each can be characterized by having one of these orientations to early and child

marriage, which makes the patterns demonstrative of the trajectories their work may take in the field. These patterns were generated based on theory of change exercises conducted with the organisations: the organisations were asked to articulate why early and child marriage is a problem; what their long-term goals are to solve it; how they wish to approach the issue; and what their strategies and the thematic areas in which they work are.

Through this exercise, it became clear that not all organisations working on early and child marriage articulate the problem in the same way. Organisations' visions of long-term solutions are based on their articulation, which in turn influences their approaches to problem solving, the strategies they employ and the thematic areas they work on. While no organisation fits neatly into one or another pattern, the patterns work as tools to better grasp the landscape of interventions.

### PATTERN 1: A FOCUS ON AGE AT MARRIAGE



## PATTERN 2: A FOCUS EMPOWERMENT



### ARTICULATION OF THE PROBLEM

All the organisations we visited are doing valuable work, often under very difficult conditions; the organisations in both categories see early and child marriage as a serious issue, and all are working sincerely to tackle what they see as the most important problems. A significant difference between these two approaches is what the organisations see as the problem. For organisations working with a primary focus on age at marriage, the problem that needs addressing is girls getting married before the legal age of 18. For those organisations that primarily work through an empowerment approach, the problem that needs to be addressed is the lack of agency and choice among young people, within a hostile community context that disables them from making informed decisions, such as deciding their age at marriage.

Organisations that articulate their problem within the framework of age at marriage are less likely to engage with the complex realities in the field and more likely to follow the official discourse of the state and the development sector (including funding organisations). They hope to achieve child marriage-free zones within each state, where all marriages must take place after 18. They pay a lot of attention to measuring the number of child marriages prevented or the decline in the total percentage of child

marriage within the region following their interventions. Such organisations have varied articulations of why they think early and child marriage is a problem. Some of these articulations are not well formed, while others may be strategically limited based on the community within which they work. Often, even when an organisation has a strong articulation of the problem, when it seeks to impact a particular community, it doesn't engage with the realities of that community. In their dialogue with the community, these organisations tend to emphasise the dominant messages of the state and the development sector—i.e., poor health (particularly sexual and reproductive) and dropping out of school. Since this is a borrowed articulation that is taken from the development sector, rather than one that emerges from the concerns of affected communities and actual experiences in the field, it is reproduced by the organisation without consideration of the community and often seems to find little resonance with the realities on the ground.

Organisations that follow the second pattern have room for a lot more diversity: some organisations in this category, for example, find early and child marriage problematic as a violation of the fundamental human rights of young people, while others offer a critical articulation of the institution of marriage altogether.

*For organisations working with a primary focus on age at marriage, the problem that needs addressing is girls getting married before the legal age of 18. For those organisations that primarily work through an empowerment approach, the problem that needs to be addressed is a lack of agency and choice among young people.*

### GOALS

For many organisations within the first category, numerical measurement and targets take precedence over other aspects of their work, often against the will of the organisation itself. Grassroots organisations that struggle for funds feel compelled to align themselves with the vision of the development sector to “end the practice of child marriage.” Organisations in the second category tend to aspire toward a vision where all young people are able to access all basic human rights or aim to empower young people to exercise their agency in making important life decisions.

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## APPROACHES

Because the first category of organisations follow the discourse of the development sector, their approach toward the issue is not informed by root causes or by the specific local contexts within which they work. Because of the emphasis on numbers, these organisations focus on behavioural change rather than attitudinal change, and use individual role models to motivate others to follow suit. These organisations primarily use law in different capacities as a way of enforcing age of marriage or use campaigns to create awareness of the law and commonly articulated impacts of early and child marriage.

Organisations in the second category approach the issue from an adolescent-centric perspective, understanding that young people need different rights than children do, and they try to work with groups to create a space for dialogue about these rights, rather than merely emphasising a few role models to showcase those who were able to access more rights. Some of these organisations understand that empowerment can only be achieved when young people understand the social structures that disempower them, an understanding that can be further developed into collective dialogue and struggle. They create space for adolescents to voice their own opinions, beliefs and desires. They also understand that not all adolescent desires should be fulfilled, but they engage with such desires by counselling young people, rather than by using force or authority.

## STRATEGIES

Not every organisation has an existing theory of change; however, by probing the organisations with specific questions, we can understand the different strategies they take to reach their desired outcomes. These range from creating awareness about the harmful implications of early and child marriage to facilitating better implementation of the 2006 Prohibition of Child Marriage Act. While these are direct strategies, many organisations also use indirect routes, such as helping adolescents voice alternative life aspirations or creating safe spaces that young people can access to resist forced marriage.

Similarly, some strategies work toward their desired goal by creating fear among the community, while others try to create conversations through collectives or provide alternative spaces and life options to young people.

## THEMES

Thematic areas are numerous and include everything from education to sexual and reproductive health rights, from law to livelihoods, from violence to the media. Education is seen both in the literature, as well as in the field, as an effective means of preventing early and child marriage: it is typically perceived as a tool that provides girls with the power to negotiate and raise the age of marriage. One of the limiting elements of education-based interventions, however, is they tend to reinforce “good-girl” and “good-boy” norms.

Staff members at one organisation working on health, when asked why they think girls should get married after age 18, said that once a girl turns 18 her body and mind are “ready,” an idea often mentioned, but one for which they had no actual explanation.

Almost all organisations working with violence agreed that girls married at a younger age face a higher level of violence as compared to older women, yet this did not inform their perspective or work with girls. We found no organisation actually working on, or addressing, this issue in the field. Girls may face physical, mental, emotional and sexual violence when they protest against something in their marital homes or if they refuse to have sex with their husbands. These organisations still use early pregnancy and maternal health as arguments against early and child marriage, instead of talking about increased violence, lack of sexual agency or the burdens of adulthood.

## GAPS IN EXISTING INTERVENTIONS

Having analysed the different types of organisations working directly or indirectly on early and child marriage, some broad gaps are evident. Once again, this is not to say that individual organisations have not worked hard to fill these gaps. Amid the hard work of these organisations, we offer these observations in the hope of creating conversation around possibilities for the future.

## GAPS IN ARTICULATION

Only some organisations acknowledge issues of right to choice and consent within marriage decisions, and very few actually view marriage critically as a social institution that reproduces inequalities.

## GAPS IN LONG-TERM GOALS

There is a dearth of organisations that see young people's empowerment, their ability to exercise choice and voice consent, as their final goal.

## GAPS IN APPROACHES

Organisations in the field currently approach the issue hoping to bring about behavioural change, rather than attitudinal change. These approaches are typically focused more on preventing child marriage than on empowerment.

## GAPS IN STRATEGIES

There is a lack of institutional spaces that provide adolescents alternatives to marriage or help them resist early and child marriage. This absence is the most prominent gap, though not the only gap, in strategies.

## GAPS IN THEMES

There is almost no work being done at the intersection of boys, masculinity and early marriage. Work on sexual and reproductive health often takes a limiting and negative approach to sexuality and excludes conversations around young people's desires. Education initiatives are often used instrumentally, rather than to create alternative educational spaces (or engage with existing ones) to make education empowering for young people. Livelihood organisations are able to provide tangible skills but fail to help adolescents to translate these into employability and financial independence, and basic career counselling is missing. While organisations that use art or sports do exist and are quite successful in reaching their desired goals, there are too few organisations that work on these innovative thematic areas, which hold potential for social change.

The lack of engagement with issues of violence is also an example of how, because of the overwhelming focus of most organisations on delaying marriage, once a girl marries at a young age, she tends to be forgotten. There is a need for more organisations to make the connection between early marriage and domestic violence, not only to build arguments around it, but also to provide support for those young brides who do experience violence. Despite sexuality being at the core of both root causes and impacts, organisations are not addressing sexuality beyond sexual violence, if they are addressing it at all.

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The way monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is currently understood and implemented has a negative impact on interventions. By increasing pressure to meet quantitative indicators or other targets, it is encouraging quick-fix strategies that ultimately narrow, rather than broaden, the dialogue between organisations and communities. The pressure M&E lays on efficacy undermines the challenges faced by organisations—a problem that continues to grow, since the longer an organisation doesn't talk about problems, the harder it is to spark honest dialogue and reflection. Finally, by emphasising a flat, simplistic understanding of the problems involved (in order to make them easier to monitor) this approach leads to solutions that offer Band-Aids but fail to address the multiplicity of issues involved.

*The way monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is currently understood and implemented has a negative impact on interventions. By increasing pressure to meet quantitative indicators or other targets, it is encouraging quick-fix strategies that ultimately narrow, rather than broaden, the dialogue between organisations and communities.*

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the extensive research conducted in the landscape analysis, we make the following recommendations for agencies interested in working on the issue to effectively and sustainably address the issue of early and child marriage in India:

- Broaden the way we define and articulate the problem of early and child marriage to include issues related to gender, sexuality and the centrality of marriage and violence in society
- Focus on empowering young people. Reducing early and child marriage is only one step in realizing this goal
- Invest in research and knowledge-building around issues of gender and masculinity, sexuality and marriage
- Engage critically with the deeply entrenched societal norms around marriage, as a path to bring about sustainable social change
- Empower young people to be critical partners in the work to stop early and child marriage and to imagine and pursue other possibilities based on their needs and aspirations
- Ensure that root causes (e.g., rigid gender roles, control of sexuality, etc.) are understood and addressed in interventions around early and child marriage
- Recognize the shortcomings of existing interventions, and build the capacities of organizations to grapple with them
- Re-evaluate monitoring and evaluation techniques to measure and assess not only important behavioural outcomes, but the changes in values and attitudes taking place within communities. In this way, funding agencies can empower organizations to better address the root causes of early and child marriage.

## CONCLUSION

Today, there is a growing international interest in the issue of early and child marriage. As communities, governments and funders seek to shape interventions to address this practice, we hope that the findings of this report will inform their thinking.

Early and child marriage in India is symptomatic of multiple, interconnected root causes and structural inequalities. Effective, sustainable solutions to this complex problem must engage with all of the multiple factors that perpetuate the practice. Interventions must also empower young people to critique the social norms inherent to marriage in their culture and participate in advocating for a collective process of change within their broader communities.

We hope that all who are concerned about this issue will join in building thoughtful, nuanced and empowering solutions to early and child marriage in India—and around the world.

*Early and child marriage in India is symptomatic of multiple, interconnected root causes and structural inequalities. Effective, sustainable solutions to this complex problem must engage with all of the multiple factors that perpetuate the practice.*

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# *Introduction*

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Conversations about child marriage evoke emotional responses in most of us. We feel a particular kind of discomfort seeing images of clueless young girls in bridal outfits. Discomfort turns to anger when you add stories of girls as young as six years old married to men many times their age.<sup>2</sup> Imagining what comes next—the possibilities for oppression, sexual violence, rape, early pregnancy, maternal and child mortality—can make our blood curdle and leave us with an urgent feeling, even a moral imperative, to intervene against the practice of “marrying too young.”<sup>3</sup> Organisations around the world capitalize on this response by running emotional campaigns, which are effective in generating contributions and cementing public opinion.

However, reality is more complex than campaign propaganda. Legally, any marriage where one or both contracting parties are below the age of 18 can be classified as “child marriage.” This definition was ratified by the United Nations, as a part of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989.<sup>4</sup> Across the world, the legal age at marriage varies between 16 and 18 years. In India, the legal age for girls is 18 and for boys is 21. Almost half of the entire population of girls in the country will marry before, or by the time, they are 18. This is an alarming number in itself, but a closer look reveals the majority of them marry between the ages of 15 and 18. Currently, the average age at marriage for girls in India is 17.2.<sup>5</sup>

*The less dramatic, but widely pervasive, impacts of marrying too young, or without consent or choice, are that young women and young men alike are stripped of their agency and voice in important life decisions, including education, health, livelihoods and parenting. Such marriages also reinforce existing structural inequalities, as they relate to age, gender, class, caste, religion, sexuality and the global political economy.*

The intention of providing these statistics is not to trivialize the issue of child marriage in India. Instead, they reveal a more complex problem: though the age at marriage has increased, that seemingly positive development has not empowered young people as would be hoped. The less dramatic, but widely pervasive, impacts

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2 UNFPA 2012.

3 Too Young To Wed 2015.

4 OCHCR 1989.

5 National Family Health Survey 2005-2006.

of marrying too young, or without consent or choice, are that young women and young men alike are stripped of their agency and voice in important life decisions, including education, health, livelihoods and parenting. Such marriages also reinforce existing structural inequalities, as they relate to age, gender, class, caste, religion, sexuality and the global political economy. These inequalities, the root causes of child marriage, are still prevalent despite the rising age at marriage. Furthermore, these social and economic structures interact with the lives of adolescents differently than they do with the lives of children.

Bearing these factors in mind, we argue for certain specific changes in the existing discourse. Firstly, we advocate for the use of “early and child marriage,” as it acknowledges the centrality of age to this issue, and also allows for the specificities of adolescence. Secondly, by viewing the issue through a feminist lens, we see reason to engage with it less out of a moral imperative, and more out of the need to engage politically with social structures governed by an inequality of power as well as various hierarchies. Thirdly, we urge moving away from a rigid focus on “age at marriage” and toward a broader emphasis on consent and choice. Lastly, despite the statistically higher incidence of early and child marriage among girls, we advocate that attention also be paid to its impact on boys and their struggles with patriarchy.

American Jewish World Service commissioned this study in 2013, and our work has been conducted amid increasing global interest in what the UN refers to as “early, child and forced marriage.”<sup>6</sup> Many anticipate the issue will play an important role in the post-Millennium Development Goals (MDG) agenda of the international development community. In the last few years, the discourse has also evolved, and with the United Nations calling it a “slavery-like reality for girls,” for the first time early and child marriage is being viewed as an issue of women’s rights.<sup>7</sup> We hope our analysis from a feminist perspective will influence the way we engage with the issue going forward.

Toward this end, we start out by unpacking the two concepts at the centre of early and child marriage: marriage and age.

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6 UN Resolution Number A/C.3/68/L.29.

7 See the second section for a detailed history of the discourse around child marriage.

## CONTEXTUALIZING MARRIAGE

Family is arguably the most important institution in shaping our lives. It is a complex space where our most intimate affective, emotional and material desires are both regulated and, hopefully, fulfilled. It is where we are initiated into societal norms and where we first learn to negotiate our way around gender, caste, religion, class, sexuality and race. Family is the space where regulatory regimes of the state and society interact with the personal, as members of the family hold each other to live up to the norms that are expected of them—from the good father, to the good daughter, to the good citizen.<sup>8</sup>

Marriage plays a central role in reproducing the family, which is why we passionately celebrate and fiercely regulate it. This is particularly true for India, where individuals are identified by their location within families and wider kin networks. After a certain age, a person's identity, legitimacy and ability to participate in society hinge on his or her marital status. Marriage is, in many ways, seen as a transition to adulthood.

*After a certain age, a person's identity, legitimacy and ability to participate in society hinge on his or her marital status. Marriage is, in many ways, seen as a transition to adulthood. As an interview respondent put it, "A 16-year-old married girl is a woman, and a 30-year-old unmarried woman is a girl."*

From childhood, we are socialised to believe that marriage is a key milestone in our lives. Girls are expected to make marriage their central goal, and train to become good wives and daughters-in-law. They become adept at placing their interests as subordinate to those of their family, even when decisions affect their lives the most.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as an interview respondent put it, "A 16-year-old married girl is a woman, and a 30-year-old unmarried woman is a girl." Add to this fairy tales of romantic sexual love that are churned out by the media, and it becomes clear that many young adults themselves desire to be married early to find their legitimate space in society while they fulfil their most intimate desires. While these desires are rooted in a patriarchal structure and reproduce heteronormative ideas about gender, family and sexuality, the fact that this

is often what young people want is something that the discourse around early and child marriage needs to take into consideration.

Regardless of girls' own desires to marry, for a majority of them, marriage will involve material trade-offs, a rupture of primary kin relations and a difficult process of adjusting to a subordinate status in their marital home, a family of strangers.<sup>10</sup> The dynamics of the marital family, or the marriage itself, are by design far from egalitarian. Yet most conversations around early and child marriage skirt any critical dialogue on marriage itself, despite the long-standing feminist critique of it as an institution that reproduces patriarchy.

A critical dialogue around marriage doesn't mean discarding the institution entirely. On the contrary, we wish to reclaim the radical potential of marriage, as many progressive social movements across the world have recognized in the past. Challenging existing norms around marriage, revolutionaries like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, one of the authors of India's constitution, identified that inter-caste marriages provide a promising solution to the caste problem. Others saw "marriages of choice," or what some deemed "marriages of comrades within the struggle," as a way to challenge the existing status quo of inequality and oppression. Despite this, discussions around marriage have been cut short, even within the post-independence women's movement in India.

Critical conversations around marriage and family are not easy to have. They are fraught with complexities because these institutions not only fulfil material needs, but also affective and emotional needs that cannot be neatly measured and calculated. The fears, anxieties and desires of individuals and communities have as much of an impact on decision-making as economic conditions or the law. Effective discourse on early and child marriage requires honest dialogue around all the factors that influence decision-making, including why, how, when, where and whether a marriage is entered into. That is only possible if we understand the material and emotional realities of the individuals and communities making the decisions.

Our experience in the field with these conversations made us see how, contrary to popular discourse, early and child marriage is not some archaic, static practice rooted in tradition. It is the product of dynamic, evolving decisions that are very responsive to changing external realities. Our report is dedicated to demonstrating how looking at marriage in this way changes how one understands and engages with the issue of early and child marriage.

8 Rao 2005.

9 Mensch et al, 1998.

10 Uberoi 1993.

## CONTEXTUALIZING AGE

Because there is no critical dialogue around marriage, the entire discourse around early and child marriage is focused on age. As the section on the history of child marriage in India illustrates, the “appropriate” age is a random number that has changed dramatically over the years, as have the reasons for changing it. The current legally acceptable age at marriage for girls is 18 and for boys is 21. Government institutions, and the culture at large, are strongly inclined to enforce this rule, even though we recognize that it is arbitrary; few of us can convincingly explain what would change if a girl was married at 17 and a half instead of at 18. This silence indicates the arbitrariness of numerical age as the primary indicator of when marriage is acceptable.

*A blind emphasis on age becomes a distraction from the real problems of choice and consent. A shift away from age throws light on how the politics of choice and consent function similarly across all groups in society.*

The widespread practice of creating fake “age proofs” for younger girls proves this arbitrariness, as does the fact that underage marriages may not be registered legally, even if the social rituals are performed and the couple begins cohabiting with one another. A blind emphasis on age becomes a distraction from the real problems of choice and consent. In several recent cases, two consenting but underage individuals sought marriage as a way to be together and to exit their disempowering realities. Both the state and most individuals opposed and actively intervened against such cases, pushing these adolescents further into desperate situations. Such blind emphasis also means that forced (non-consenting) child marriages are pushed into the margins. Moreover, focus on prevention takes attention away from those that are already married underage or through force, and are in need of help. By looking at young adults along the spectrum of unmarried, younger married and older married, the discourse could cater to the different needs of each group.

Finally, a shift away from age throws light on how the politics of choice and consent function similarly across all groups in society. While urban, elite, educated families may marry their daughters after the legal age, the nature in which the marriage is entered and the restricted space in which girls can exercise their agency remain constant

and reproduce similar inequalities as with their rural, uneducated, impoverished counterparts.

## STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

Our research and the current report are structured using the components of the theory of change. Following brief sections on the history and demographics of early and child marriage in India, the report starts out with an articulation of the problem, where we unpack what our research has found to be the causes and impacts of early and child marriage. At this stage, we broaden the scope of what constitutes the problem and how it is understood. Following this, we analyse existing interventions, using the same model, by listing the diverse articulations of the problem that exist in the field. Informed by these articulations, the interventions’ architects decide their long-term goals, their approaches to the issue, their strategies and the thematic areas in which they work. Through this we establish how changes to the articulation of the problem have a direct impact on the capacity of interventions to achieve desirable outcomes (see Illustration 1 on the following page).

Through this exercise, we highlight the patterns in how organisations approach and intervene on the issue, followed by an analysis of promising elements and gaps within these approaches. We then provide recommendations for both organisations and funders, and make the case for a comprehensive design of monitoring and evaluation that creates space for the complexities of the issue. We hope that this flow will help the reader see the links between how a problem is understood and how it can be effectively addressed. We also hope that the reader will see how the choice of strategies is almost implicit in the understanding of the problem itself.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the demographics of incidence and prevalence of early and child marriage in India (by geographic area, socioeconomic status, ethnic identity and other factors?)
2. What are the factors that impact decision-making on early and child marriage? Who are the key actors involved in this process?
3. What are the root causes of early and child marriage? How do key players in the field understand these root causes?
4. Why do organisations work on early and child marriage? Why do they oppose it? What is their vision of desired change?

## ILLUSTRATION 1: THE CYCLE OF THE THEORY OF CHANGE



5. How do organisations approach early and child marriage? What are the strategies being adopted?
6. What are the gaps in existing interventions? What strategies have emerged as promising?
7. How can monitoring and evaluation around progress on the issue be done meaningfully?

### METHODOLOGY

Our research consisted of five components.

The first component was a review of the existing literature on early and child marriage—key studies, academic articles, reports and policy documents found using key word searches on various internet search engines, both academic and general. These were corroborated by the recommendations of key informants that have a background of extensive work on the issue. The review of the literature and recommendations from key informants

provided us with an intellectual and theoretical base, an understanding of existing laws and government efforts, and the gaps therein. A bibliography of the literature used can be found in Annexure 1. The detailed review will be published on our website, [www.nirantar.net](http://www.nirantar.net).

The second component was a series of interviews with 12 key informants, including academics, consultants, practitioners and researchers, who offered their overall knowledge about early and child marriage as well as their expertise on specific aspects of the issue, such as law, sexuality, masculinity, media, funding and history (Annexure 2). They also offered their understanding of the approaches employed by various field organisations to help us identify which organisations to visit.

The third component was the theory of change developed by the research team (Annexure 4). This encompasses our understanding and articulation of the problem (of

early and child marriage) based on feminist theories and experience working with communities. The format of theory of change requires researchers to explicitly state assumptions that influence our articulation of the problem. These assumptions are then tested against evidence from the field. Logically, if our assumptions emerge to be true, it follows that our articulation of the problem is based on evidence and is accurate. This articulation then informs our long-term goals, approaches and strategies, both theoretically and by testing against data emerging from the research.

*Our research consisted of five components: a review of the existing literature on early and child marriage; a series of interviews with 12 key informants; a theory of change developed by the research team; and primary data collection involving visits to 19 organizations and a national consultation with more than 50 others across seven states in India.*

The fourth component was primary data collection. Using the knowledge of our key informants, as well as our theory of change, we conducted field visits to 19 organisations across seven states in India—Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and New Delhi. Semi-structured individual and group interviews, as well as focus-group discussions, were conducted with adolescent girls and boys, youth groups, women's collectives, men and other community members such as teachers, panchayat members, government officials (including local police officials) and religious leaders.<sup>10</sup> Focus-group discussions were also conducted with the staff of all 19 organisations to get their understanding and articulation of the issues on the ground, their own theories of change, their approaches to dealing with early and child marriage, and their desired outcomes. A list of all organisations can be found in Annexure 3.

10 Collectives are small groups of people, driven by a strong sense of shared vision, which seek to promote democratic processes and decision-making. Group is a looser term than collective. Groups are typically formed on the basis of certain identities; youth groups are common. These are mostly formed with the purpose of providing a common forum rather than a common vision or purpose. In India, women's collectives are typically much more organised than men's groups or youth groups, and are socially recognized spaces for women and their issues.

The fifth component, both an important source of data and a means to learn about the field, was the National Consultation on Early and Child Marriage, organised by Nirantar in December 2013, a two-day event in which 42 participants from 38 organisations across the country participated. The event included discussions on root causes, strategies, gaps and challenges, monitoring and evaluation, discussions regarding funding and ways forward. Detailed findings and reflections from the national consultation, along with reflections from three other consultations around early and child marriage, organised by other agencies and attended by members of our research team, can be found on Nirantar's website.

## SAMPLING CRITERIA

To identify organisations to visit, we started with a short list of those states that have a high incidence of early and child marriage. These states were then grouped by socioeconomic and cultural commonalities and diversities; for example, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were grouped together because of their similarities, and we then chose Bihar because we agreed it would be most telling. States were chosen from different regions in the country to ensure inclusion and diversity.

Based on the final short-list of states, we compiled a list of organisations in each state that work on the issue of early and child marriage, categorized by thematic emphasis, to ensure a mix of organisations focused on education, health, livelihoods and the law. A parallel consideration was ensuring a mix of those working with collectives, those engaging young adults directly and those with various levels of engagement with government efforts and laws. From this list, which organisations were finally selected depended on their availability and their ability to facilitate field visits with communities.

Our aim was to map and study the interventions and approaches developed and implemented by grassroots organisations. Thus, all the organisations selected in the study are non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations working directly on the issue of early and child marriage. Though we did meet some government functionaries and collected key information about some state-level, government-sponsored programmes as well, most of those observations were limited to understanding the context in which these organisations were working.

## REFLECTIONS

As feminists, the notion that the “personal is political” is at the heart of our epistemology. Because marriage is so central (or has been at some point) in all our lives,

the patterns of behaviour in and around marriage that emerged from the data were easily identifiable within our own personal lives and tried to stay conscious of barriers of class, caste, geographical location, education, etc.—and that could create a division between “us and them.” As a team, we agreed that it was vital to overcome these barriers to avoid falling into an approach that was instrumental, reductionist or patronizing. The team was also able to strategically use our diversity in age and marital status; for example, during field visits, younger members of the team were able to gain the trust of and speak to adolescents, while older members spoke with older generations of people.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Nirantar Trust, a centre for gender and education, was founded in 1993 and works toward enabling empowering education, especially for girls and women from marginalized communities. Nirantar seeks to build the capacities of a wide range of actors, including community leaders, teachers and staff members of NGOs and government programmes, to create teaching and learning materials and to undertake research and advocacy on critical issues. For the past seven years, we have helped organisations working within rural communities strengthen their interventions with adolescents and women, particularly on issues of sexuality. We also work directly at the community level with girls and women from marginalized communities on literacy, education and a range of other issues related to empowerment, including health, sexuality and livelihoods.

Our work with adolescent girls started 20 years ago with the creation of Mahila Shikshan Kendra, a residential educational centre for women and girls, which has now been mainstreamed in Mahila Samakhya, a nationwide government programme for the empowerment of rural women and girls. More recently, we have also sought to strengthen training curricula for adolescent education and life-skills education by collaborating with agencies such as the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to infuse these crucial aspects of education with an empowerment perspective. Nirantar also

engages in capacity building on sexuality and gender with organisations that work with adolescents on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR).

Nirantar harnesses more than two decades of knowledge on the issues of gender, education, sexuality, livelihoods and culture, gained through direct interventions at the community level, partnerships with a wide range of organisations and active engagement with the women’s movement in India. Our experience is rooted in community-level work, and we use this experience to create knowledge and foment policy advocacy.<sup>11</sup> Thus, we bridge the gap between practice and theory, bringing together grassroots experience and academic scholarship.<sup>12</sup>

Nirantar has extensive experience carrying out participatory, multi-method research studies, with a strong focus on making recommendations for change. Work at the community level builds strong communication skills and a close understanding of the realities of the field, both essential for studying early and child marriage. One of the key limitations of existing research is the lack of emphasis on sexuality; even the few organisations that recognize the significance of sexuality have had difficulty creating honest discussions around sexuality, especially with girls who are shy to talk about marriage. This is an area of our expertise, with years of experience in breaking the silence around sexuality and in emphasising the need to recognize the links between the politics of gender and sexuality. As organisations with a holistic perspective, and experience working on education that is relevant to the lived realities of women and girls, we were well placed to study the landscape of early and child marriage in India.

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11 For details on Nirantar’s capacity building on sexuality with community-based organisations, please visit <http://www.nirantar.net/index.php/page/view/104>.

12 This strategy is evidenced also in Nirantar’s research on the micro-credit-based Self Help Group (SHG) phenomenon, which generated an alternative discourse on SHGs in the country. Nirantar has also undertaken action research, such as ethnographic research on literacy and numeracy, as well as academic research on the construction of gender in school textbooks along with women’s studies departments in different states.





## *A Historical Perspective*

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In India, records of child marriage (as it has long been referred to) date as far back as pre-colonial times. Finding legitimacy through religious texts, this formerly “upper-caste” practice became widespread across society by the 19th century.<sup>13</sup> By adhering to rigid social norms about what classified as an “ideal match,” child marriage made it easier to protect “blood purity” and social boundaries. Its primary function was to ensure that childbearing took place within the confines of one’s own caste and religion. Girls were commonly married before they were 10 years old, and the ceremony was conducted whenever a potential match was found, even if in the child’s infancy. In such cases, the ritual was separated from the consummation of marriage, which was permitted (and encouraged) as soon as the bride attained puberty.

The practice first came under the microscope following the colonization of India. European governments used it to justify their role in India as civilizers of “barbaric practices.” Indian social reformers responded by engaging with child marriage in order to defend the rest of Indian culture from Western influence and conversion. Many reformers believed that Indian cultural practices were superior to those in the West, and that child marriage had crept in due to ignorance; they hoped that eliminating some harmful practices could restore the glory of that former culture. Some reformers, like Dr. Mahendralal Sircar, saw abortions, premature births and early pregnancies as the cause of an overall weak population that repeatedly fell under the rule of “tyrants” from abroad.<sup>14</sup> Others, like Pandit Vidyasagar, blamed outmoded customs and religious laws for the “endless misery” of child widowhood, population problems and the poor health of mother and children. Others highlighted how such practices restrict women to the household, keeping them devoid of a voice in public life. As the nationalist movement grew, Gandhi and others recognized the need for women’s participation in the struggle for independence, even if just for instrumental reasons of increasing the movement’s strength and demonstrating that Indian women were on par with their British counterparts.

Women, when they were heard, also challenged child marriage as one of the most oppressive practices imposed on them. Among these few voices, Rukhmabai’s 1884 testimonies offer a mirror to the harshness of patriarchal Hindu society. Rukhmabai was married at the age of 11 to a wayward cousin, in the hopes that marriage would reform him. She was expected to consummate her marriage on reaching puberty, but resisted in the hopes of continuing

her education and stayed on in her natal home for another 11 years until her husband sought legal recourse. Through her court case, and her columns for the Times of India, written under the pseudonym of A Hindu Lady, she provided a thorough critique of indigenous patriarchy and held that she preferred courting imprisonment for violating orders than remaining in a marriage that she did not want. The response of the courts, coming from no less than the chief justice of the Bombay High Court at the time, was to blame those “well-meaning but ill-advised people who not only educated but impregnated Rukhmabai, *after she had been married*, with English ideas on the subject of matrimony so as to render her entirely unfit to discharge the duties of marriage. No more girls, His Lordship hoped, would be so handicapped by education.”<sup>15</sup>

*The practice of child marriage first came under the microscope following the colonization of India. European governments used it to justify their role in India as civilizers of “barbaric practices.” Despite their “mission to civilize,” the British government remained reluctant to intervene in marriage.*

Despite their “mission to civilize,” the British government remained reluctant to intervene in marriage. Amid India’s growing nationalist movement, British officials felt such interventions would further fuel discontent. When approached by reformers, the British government limited its efforts to the sensational issues of early consummation and early pregnancy—the “immediate evils” of child marriage—rather than the long-range consequences for society.<sup>16</sup> The British went on to set a minimum age at consummation of marriage in 1891, skirting all other issues around child marriage. This colonial legacy of the focus on age still shapes today’s discourse on early and child marriage.

Nevertheless, this 1891 reform was the first of its kind, where political mobilisation led by reformers within India and abroad, around an issue concerning women, was linked to a successful change in law. Although it was not particularly significant, the bill did give the reform movement national recognition, and the question of child marriage became an inescapable part of nationalist ideologies. The movement gained momentum with the 1921 League of Nations conference on trafficking in

1 Uma Chakravathy interview.

2 Heimsath 1964.

15 Chandra 1998.

16 Forbes 1979.

women and girls.<sup>17</sup> With renewed zest, reformers now started introducing acts in the Indian legislature as a way to impact the issue, though these were shot down.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, in 1927, Rai Sahib Harbilas Sarada introduced the Child Marriage Restraint Bill, setting a minimum age of marriage at 14 years for girls and 18 years for boys. He argued that legislating age of consent did not address child marriage, stating that his bill, if passed and enforced, would end the problem of child widows and give female children an opportunity to develop physically and mentally. He related social reform to the growing nationalist movement: “So long as these evils exist in this country, we will have neither the strength of arm nor the strength of character to win freedom.”<sup>19</sup> The Sarada Act was passed in 1929.

We have inherited three important legacies in how we engage with the issue: narrow focuses on health, age, and the law and state. These legacies have diverted attention from the role of women’s empowerment, issues of consent and choice beyond age, and the need to engage with early and child marriage as a social and political issue, rather than a purely legal or state-centric one. This is one of the reasons why political movements in post-independence India, particularly the women’s movement, have had a highly limited engagement, if any, with early and child marriage.

The women’s movement agenda included domestic violence and dowry, but child marriage, though closely tied to both, stayed in the shadows. All subsequent changes to the age at marriage component of the Sarada

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17 Gupta 1925.

18 Kapadia 1966.

19 Kumar 1993.

Act, as well as the passing of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2006, happened independently of attention from the women’s movement. Most of these legal efforts have been intended to reduce the fertile years of girls within marriage, as a means to limit the country’s population growth and reduce its health care costs. None of these have focused on empowering young girls or challenging patriarchy.

*This legacy has diverted attention from the role of women’s empowerment, issues of consent and choice beyond age, and the need to engage with early and child marriage as a social and political issue, rather than a purely legal or state-centric one.*

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The discourse within the development sector continues to be stunted at many levels. Internationally, as well as in India, there is a tendency to frame early and child marriage as a “native practice,” a problem that plagues the Global South, that plagues a different culture and less educated people, or simply a problem of “the other.” This representation strips the practice of all its underlying causes and complexities (such as teenage pregnancies), which have resonance around the world, and are as relevant to the Global North as they are to the Global South. The key lesson from this history is that we must broaden today’s discourse and view early and child marriage differently from how it has been viewed in the past. The main difference, we argue, is to look at the practice alongside its structural root causes and engage critically with both, with a focus on empowering young people to bring about positive social change. We will elaborate on this position with evidence in the following sections.



## *Demographics*

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This section provides the statistical prevalence of early and child marriage in India. Here we flesh out how age at marriage varies across economic class, caste, religion, education and geographical location. It is tempting to create direct causality based on this data, but we urge against it. Correlations notwithstanding, to assume a direct causality leads to oversimplification, a neglect of root causes and a focus on limited interventions. Along with this data, we again remind the reader of the need to broaden the overall discourse away from the current focus on age and its correlates.

*Despite the difference in legal age of marriage between girls (18) and boys (21), the percent of girls married before their legal age is the same as the percent of boys married by the age of 25, highlighting the gendered nature of early and child marriage.*

According to the National Family Health Survey (2005-2006), more than half the women in India are married before the legal age of 18. Of these, 12 percent are married before the age of 15. The average age at marriage is 17.2 years, a rise from an average age of 16.7 years a decade prior. Among boys, 16 percent are married before 18 years of age and 28 percent are married before the legal age of 21. Despite the difference in legal age of marriage between girls and boys, the percent of girls married before their legal age is the same as the percent of boys married by the age of 25, highlighting the gendered nature of early and child marriage. It also points to a common age gap (often as wide as 10 years) between husband and wife.

India is a country of contradictions. It is vast and diverse enough that people speak a different dialect every 100 kilometres, an indication of the many nuances within the country's traditions and cultural practices. At the same time, there are strong and common threads in cultural practices and beliefs that run through this diversity. Out of India's 29 states and seven union territories, a combination of factors (culture, economy, religion, etc.) have led to a particularly high incidence of early and child marriage in eight states of the country. Table 1 below provides statistics from these states as well as two others, Maharashtra and Karnataka, which are marginally below the national average.

## SUMMARY OF EARLY AND CHILD MARRIAGE BY STATE

The national average of women married before the legal age is 45.6 percent and that of men is 26.6 percent. The following details the eight states where the rate of early and child marriage is higher than the national average: Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh and West Bengal. Even though their rates are lower than the national average, Maharashtra and Karnataka are included in this list because of their proximity to the national average, and a strong agreement from local organisations working in the region that the practice is an important issue. The following table lists the percentage of people by state that are married before the legal age, broken down between men and women and also between urban areas and rural areas.

## AGE AND ITS CORRELATIONS

State	Women (Urban)	Women (Rural)	Women (Total)	Men (Urban)	Men (Rural)	Men (Total)
India	29.7	53.4	45.6	14.6	33.9	26.6
Jharkhand	32.7	70.1	60.2	19.5	50.0	40.7
Rajasthan	36.3	67.4	58.4	27.8	59.4	49.2
Bihar	37.8	68.6	63.7	18.7	42.3	36.9
Andhra Pradesh	43.4	62.9	56.2	16.5	36.2	28.9
West Bengal	31.3	62.3	53.3	11.9	30.8	24.7
Madhya Pradesh	33.7	60.4	52.6	18.8	50.8	40.7
Uttar Pradesh	31.8	59.4	52.2	22.2	49.4	40.5
Chattisgarh	26.4	57.6	50.5	15.2	46.6	39.9

Table 1: Percentage of the Population Married Before the Legal Age

## LOCATION

Women from urban areas, on average, marry more than two years later than their rural counterparts. The median age at marriage among urban women was 18.8 years, compared with 16.4 years among rural women. The proportion of Indians who have never married is higher in urban areas. 25 percent of urban women aged 15-49 have never been married, as compared with 17 percent of rural women. Among men in the 15-49 age group, 42 percent in urban areas and 32 percent in rural areas have never been married.

*The difference between urban and rural statistics cannot directly be attributed to modernity and urbanisation. Often rural parents marry their daughters in the village before they migrate, to avoid the risks that young unwed girls face in cities.*

The difference between urban and rural statistics is quite visible. However this difference cannot directly be attributed to modernity and urbanisation. Urban areas do hold promise of better availability of education, livelihoods and health care, but are also home to a large number of migrants. Our study finds that often rural parents marry their daughters in the village before they migrate to avoid the risks that young unwed girls face in cities. Further, underage wives of men who migrate to cities usually stay back in the village and migrated parents prefer to perform underage marriage ceremonies in villages. These provide alternative explanations for the statistical difference in urban and rural age at marriage.

## ECONOMIC STATUS

Wealth has a clear correlation with the median age at first marriage. Women in the highest wealth quintile marry more than four years later than women in the lowest wealth quintile. Furthermore, the gap in the median age at marriage across wealth quintiles has widened over time. Data from women between 45-49 and 25-29 years of age at the time of the survey show that the gap in age at marriage between the highest and lowest wealth quintile widened from three and a half years two decades ago to five and a half years by 2007. This does not indicate a drop in age at the lowest quintile, but a rise in age of the highest quintile. Among men, the age at marriage in the lowest wealth quintile is between 19.6 and 20.1, whereas among men in the wealthiest quintile, the age at marriage is between 25.3 and 26.6 years of age.

## CASTE AND ETHNICITY

The demography of India is incomplete without a conversation around caste. The caste system in India is an ancient form of social segregation based on the division of labour; historically, its hierarchy places the Brahmins (priests) at the top, followed by the Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (commonly engaged with cleaning-related occupations). Each broad category has various subsections within them. This system has marginalised Shudhras and excluded them from mainstream Hindu society. While on the one hand, the struggles of lower castes have led to recognition of their exploitation, on the other, there is growing aspiration for them to be integrated into the mainstream society that is oppressive to them.<sup>20</sup> Often this is done by adopting marriage practices of the upper castes.

The age at marriage is mostly rising within the lower castes,<sup>21</sup> but at a slower pace than within upper-caste societies. However, the National Family Health Survey contends that the year of cohabitation is the year of marriage (to make a generalization across diverse practices). Within many tribal cultures we spoke to, there is a common practice of creating a *sambandh* (relationship), where, quite simply, if a man and woman wish to be together, they can do so and live together without a formalized marriage ceremony. In many cultures, couples may start cohabiting as such, and a marriage ceremony is only performed when the families have the funds to do so. In such situations, while the age at marriage is younger than 18, the relationship may be entered out of choice and not force.

## RELIGION

Religions also have varying cultural practices around marriage and norms around age at marriage. The median age at marriage by religion shows that the highest median age is among Jain women (20.8 years), followed by Christian women (20.6 years) and Sikh women (19.9 years). Hindu and Muslim women have the lowest median

20 After independence, the Indian government created three new categories in order to classify India's population and more effectively direct affirmative action: Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC).

21 The average age of marriage for women aged 20-49, was 16.3, 16.5 and 16 years, for SC, ST and OBC, respectively. The ages change to 15.9, 16.3 and 16.3, respectively, if you change the age group to 25-49 (thereby removing the youngest 5 years). Among men, the age at marriage is 22.5, 21.5 and 23.5, respectively among SC, ST and OBC categories. The report provides an aggregation of all three of these categories. There are specific reasons for the segregation of these three categories that are not important here. The distinction is mentioned because most government data is segregated according to these caste categories.

age at first marriage (16.7 years). Teenage pregnancies and motherhood are also higher for Hindus and Muslims (16 percent) than for any other religion.

## EDUCATION

For women aged 25-49, there is a seven-year difference in the median age at marriage between those women with no education and women with at least 12 years of education. Women with at least 10 years of education have sex for the first time three-and-a-half years later than women with no education. The level of teenage pregnancy and motherhood is nine times higher among women with no education than among women with twelve or more years of education. Marriage was the main reason for dropping out of school for 6 percent of girls in rural areas and 2 percent of girls in urban areas.

## LOW-INCIDENCE AREAS

So far, we have focused on how different demographic factors affect age at marriage. We even started out by segregating the country into “high-incidence” and “low-incidence” states, giving reason to believe that the demographic factors in some areas lead to a lower age at marriage. These factors intersect with each other to create complex realities, which can even lead to high-incidence pockets within low-incidence states (or vice versa). Here we look at two states, Assam and Kerala, where the percentages of girls marrying before age 18 are 38.2 percent and 17.2 percent, respectively.

Through the case studies of Assam and Kerala, we will explore other factors that have a visible impact on age at marriage; these other determinants will be discussed in detail in the following section.

### ASSAM

Assam, a state in northeast India, shares a border with eight other states and has two international borders (with Bhutan and Bangladesh). Even though Assam’s 38.2 percent of girls married under 18 may challenge its “low-incidence” status, Assam is known as having had more egalitarian practices around marriage in the past.

Ten districts have been identified as having a high (and growing) incidence of child marriage. The reasons cited include legal and illegal migration in those districts that share international borders, a history of communal violence and a history of floods. Migration brings with it risks of sexual violence and abduction and trafficking. The risk of sexual violence, rape and murder of young girls tends to increase along with communal tensions. During

floods, when families lose their homes and livelihoods, feeding and protecting young girls is seen as an additional burden. In all these instances, marriage is seen as a solution, a way to send young girls from vulnerable areas to safer areas, with the assumption that after marriage, women are safer from sexual violence and will be taken care of materially.

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Assam is composed mainly of Hindus and tribal communities, and certain cultural practices among the tribal communities delink sex and marriage, and allow “free sex”<sup>22</sup>—that is, young adults are able to have sex outside marriage without any social stigma. This has led to higher age at marriage within these communities. In addition, many communities in Assam are matrilineal and hold the empowerment of their girls as a high priority.

This case illustrates how age at marriage is a dynamic response to vulnerability, migration, climate change and natural disasters, not merely a static, age-old tradition.

### KERALA

Kerala is the southernmost state in the Indian peninsula on the western coast. At 12.1 percent, it is one of the states with the lowest rate of underage marriage in the country. Being a coastal state, it was one of the first few to encounter traders and missionaries entering the country, and thus the state has a high Catholic population. Additionally, it has a rich history of public action and social mobilisation by the labouring poor, from peasant rebellions to land and social reforms; not surprisingly, there is a strong presence of left-leaning parties, including the Communist Party of India, which have often held power in the state legislature.

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22 Presentation by Representative of State Sponsored Women’s Empowerment Program at the National Consultation on Early Marriage in India, December 2013, New Delhi.

All these factors have led to a high importance placed on literacy and education; Kerala has the highest literacy rate in the country. Education was the prime mover for the state's development and its efforts to reduce poverty, and the social importance of literacy and education led to initiatives like the library movement of the mid-1930s, creating spaces for women and child-care centers as well as for political meetings.

Several communities in Kerala are matrilineal, and property is transferred from mother to daughter. There is limited stigma attached to women who don't wish to marry or to those wishing to stay in their natal home even after a formal wedding. That said, Kerala is also a patriarchal society and has recorded high levels of violence against women as well.

As further evidence of the complexity of the demographics of marriage, a sample survey by the Population Research Center showed that despite Kerala's low overall incidence of early and child marriage, there are regional pockets of high incidence; the highest is Malapuram, where 36 percent of girls are married before they are 18 years old. Approximately 68 percent of the population in this district comes from a community with

strong links to Saudi Arabia; a large number of people migrate from Malapuram to the middle east in search of employment. They embody a type of patriarchal ethos that is particular to the Saudi economy, not least because of their religion but also because of the monarchy and the way that the country's economy is structured. These groups have been lobbying against the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act<sup>23</sup> because they feel that the act violates Sharia, Islamic law.

That lobbying effort has been criticized within India's Muslim community, including noted political agencies like the Muslim League and the Muslim Students Federation.<sup>24</sup> There is a tendency to use such stories to reinforce existing stereotypes about certain communities and feed existing biases; however, this should be avoided. We must note that, when considering the nation as a whole, age at marriage for Muslims is the same as that for Hindus—16.7 years. The practice of early and child marriage is not specific to a religion, but to larger socioeconomic conditions within which each community exists.

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23 The Hindu 2014.

24 Radhakrishnan 2013.



## *Root Causes*

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When we go to a doctor with a complaint, we expect him or her to assess our symptoms, diagnose the root cause of our problem and help us fix it. We don't want the doctor to repeatedly prescribe medication to alleviate the symptoms without addressing the root cause. We want a holistic recovery. Similarly, addressing only the symptoms of a deeply fractured society leaves the root cause of the problem undisturbed and able to spread deeper. From this perspective, we begin our exploration into the root causes of early and child marriage in India.

Structural inequalities within Indian society are the root causes of early and child marriage. India's norms and practices then reinforce and reproduce these inequalities. Norms are often seen as the cause of early and child marriage, whereas we believe they are symptoms of deeper structural inequalities. We would like to illustrate this with an example.

Dowry is a commonplace practice in India. The concept behind it is that a girl is a liability or burden to any family, and when she is wedded, the natal home is expected to aid the marital family with material resources to support her. In the context of early and child marriage, dowry is the most commonly cited reason for parents to marry their daughters at a young age because a lesser dowry is expected for younger brides. Dowry is thus often cited as a cause of early and child marriage, but that is like diagnosing a symptom as the illness itself. Dowry is only one manifestation of a patriarchal society, and addressing it without treating its cause will not only have limited success in resolving the problem, but will also enable other symptoms to erupt.

When we articulate the problem of early and child marriage, we too often focus on specific issues like dowry, chastity and poverty without voicing underlying attitudes and material realities around gender, sexuality, class, caste and religion. There isn't sufficient understanding or consensus around the articulation of root causes, leading us to replace them with limited symptomatic explanations. Many of these root causes are deeply internalised by everyone, including members of the development sector. For example, norms around sexuality or marriage are seen as a given, such that they cannot be questioned or engaged with critically. By limiting the scope of what can be called a "problem," our articulation is restricted. As traditional norms and practices interact with a fast-changing, globalising world, the symptoms change rapidly and take on new shapes. The only way to tackle these is to go to their roots. Doing so will facilitate our move away from age, toward a complex analysis of factors and their intersections that make marriage (and the decision-making around it) disempowering for adolescents.

In our report, we focus on seven primary decision-making factors. Four of these exist in the current discourse—economics of marriage; sexuality; gender norms and masculinity; and educational and institutional gaps—but here we broaden the scope of how they are discussed. Further, we add three other decision-making factors: centrality of marriage; risk, vulnerability and uncertainty; and age as an axis of power. These have been mentioned in passing in existing discourse but not focused on. We will illustrate how each of these factors play out in different ways at every stage of the marriage decision, and continue once the marriage has taken place.

These factors remain regardless of the age of marriage. A later marriage is not always a more egalitarian one. For example, inter-caste or inter-religious marriages will be opposed by some no matter the age of the bride and groom, and often, early and child marriage is a product of wanting to avoid such an eventuality. Moreover, these factors interact with one another to produce unique results in each occasion. With this complexity in mind, the examples we provide below are some illustrations of the many ways in which these intersections evolve. We have chosen these specific stories either because they were repeated in multiple places or because of the unique insight they provide into particular intersections between factors.

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## ECONOMICS OF MARRIAGE

Just as the economics of markets follow certain inherent logic, so does marriage. Such logic dictates the division of labour within the household and outside, where allocation of resources is based on patriarchy, economic inequality and the caste system. In this system, girls are viewed on the one hand as an economic burden and a drain on limited resources, leading to practices like dowry, and on the other hand as a labour resource (or as property) that can enhance production within the household. Families determine the optimal age for marriage so that that these contradictory principles can maximize benefits for the household. In a patriarchal society, those benefits are typically skewed toward the father or other

male members of the house. For example, in Rajasthan, a married 18-year-old girl told us that her father's decision to pull her out of school and get her married was in order to divert household funds toward her brother's higher education, something she deeply resented because she had hoped to study further.<sup>25</sup>

In India, the natal family considers a girl to be *paraya dhan* (someone else's wealth). This means that the productive capacities of the girl must only benefit the marital family, and the natal family must not benefit from any monetary or material support from her. In light of this norm, educating girls is a poor economic investment, while educating sons—who have the onus of taking care of the parents—is a potent one, as a son's earnings will support the parents in their old age. This norm is also at the heart of the widespread preference for sons, and the reason why some families conceive over and over again until they have a boy, which has many consequences on age of marriage for girls.

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The other implication of viewing a girl as *paraya dhan* is that her marriage is timed to when she reaches a "productive" age. It is no coincidence that marriage is linked to a girl's puberty. The productive capacities of the newly married young bride are utilised by the household for unpaid care work. She is expected to take care of other children in the family or sick elders, while the rest of the family works in the fields or seeks paid employment. In a context where families function on precarious access to incomes and material resources, the young bride's labour is central to the functioning of rural economies. On the demand side, the age of marriage is determined by the need for a woman's labour in the household. This is most visible in the practice of *atta satta*, where two extended families will exchange girls through marriage so that neither family is worse off in terms of household labour.

In some communities, a girl remains with her natal family after the marriage ceremony and only moves to the marital home after a period of time, based on certain considerations. The event of moving to the marital

25 Interview with a young married woman.

home is called *gauna*. Within these communities, on any occasion at the marital house where additional labour may be required, like a death, another marriage, or harvest season, the young bride may be beckoned. The marital family may also insist on the *gauna* when the girl's labour is required in the household, rather than when she considers it to be the right time. While the amount of household work in a girl's natal and marital home may remain the same, there is a perception that in the natal home the girl is "helping" either her mother or sisters-in-law, whereas in the marital home she is "fulfilling her duties."

Despite the importance of women's labour in the household, she never accrues any of the benefits of her labour. On the contrary, patriarchal perceptions of her as the "burden" to the household, and her financial dependence on the husband, require adherence to the norms of a good and obedient wife and daughter-in-law. Moreover, it is this concept of the girl as burden that dictates the price of the dowry.

The dowry that the marital family asks for is directly related to age. An older girl, as we have seen, will pay a higher dowry.<sup>26</sup> Younger brides typically have a lower dowry, in part because they are considered easier to control, train and socialize in the ways of the marital home and are less likely to resist. Further, because norms dictate that a girl must marry a man older than herself, an older bride requires an even older groom. This norm itself is based on the patriarchal idea that the man must be more powerful in the marriage, and age wields that power. Usually, an unmarried man with higher educational qualifications expects a higher dowry as an investment for the better life he will provide his wife.<sup>27</sup> Similar norms dictate that a smaller dowry is acceptable for "good girls." Young girls are expected to conform to gender norms and be beautiful, adaptable, docile, hardworking and talented, no matter how oppressive this may be. In one case in Jharkhand, the father of a young girl boasted that a family came asking about his daughter and offered to marry their son to her with a minimal dowry (50,000 rupees) because she was so beautiful. The father jumped at the opportunity, because dowry amounts on average are at least four times that amount (200,000 rupees).

Norms rooted in class and caste inequalities have similar ways of exacerbating dowry. In one interview in Jharkhand, men said that in the past dowry asks were often just a symbolic gesture, but rising standards of living and growing wealth (as well as growing inequality) have

26 Ghosh 2011.

27 IPPF 2006; UNICEF 2011.

made dowry a means of showing off. It is also seen as an investment toward the upward mobility of the daughter, so to marry a girl from a poorer family to a richer one, the family would have to make a substantial offer. Beyond dowry and norms around hosting and conducting marriages, the fact that the father of the bride must bear the costs of the wedding means that decisions about timing of marriage are based on whenever funds are available to the family; often multiple daughters will be married in the same ceremony to create economies of scale. Families at the intersection of class and gender disadvantage, i.e., those families that are poorer and have many daughters, are compelled to avoid higher education for their daughters and marry them off early (often together, whenever the oldest daughter is old enough to marry) to minimize dowry and save on the cost of weddings.

With the rise of global capitalism, the increased availability of wage labour places a monetary value on women's labour. Singh and Samara (1996) have found that women's increased access to paid employment influences the desire and ability of both a woman and her parents to postpone marriage. This evidence has been corroborated in other studies.<sup>28</sup>

For those focused on age at marriage, this finding gives reason to be optimistic about women's participation within the labour market; however, those concerned with structural inequalities know that the labour market is just as fraught with problems of patriarchy and exploitation as the household. The fact that poor women entering the labour market are largely limited to the informal and unorganised sector of care work, or household work, means that merely accessing labour markets and postponing marriage need not lead to empowerment. Simultaneously, as agrarian distress and the volatility of food prices destabilize rural livelihoods, women's labour in the fields is further undervalued. When families are forced to migrate, they prefer to marry their daughters before doing so because their labour is perceived to be of little use outside an agrarian setting.

## SEXUALITY

An adolescent girl in Mumbai started our interview about marriage by saying, "In India, marriage means sex." While no other respondent was able to put it as eloquently, everybody agrees, even if tacitly, that the primary role of marriage is to sanctify sex and reproduction. Society exerts control over female sexuality through marriage. Controlling women's sexuality is the only way in which

men can determine the paternity of the offspring, and thus the lineage of name, wealth, status, religion and the like. In other words, controlling women's sexuality enables reproduction of families and society.

Caste, and in particular the notion of blood purity, dictate that a girl be married as soon she reaches puberty. Otherwise, there is a risk of her blood being "corrupted" by a man of a lower caste. In Bihar, respondents from the Yadav community stated that the younger the girl, the more respectable and *punya* (holy) it is to "give her away," hinting at the likeliness of sexual purity of younger girls. People throughout Bihar differentiate between *jaangdaan*, when a girl is so young she can sit on her father's lap during the marriage ceremony, and *pattaldaan*, when she is older, has attained puberty and sits on a pedestal beside her father. There is, without doubt, a premium placed on the guarantee of a girl's virginity. By ensuring virginity, societies strengthen the social boundaries that protect accumulated wealth and privilege, and in the process

*"In India, marriage means sex."*

—*ADOLESCENT GIRL INTERVIEW RESPONDENT*

deepen existing divides across class, caste and religion. With the increase in age at marriage, and a widened gap between puberty and marriage, a girl's chastity is the indicator of her virginity. Her *chal chalan*—the way she carries her self—is constantly under the microscope of her family and community. If she wishes to delay marriage, she must maintain a chaste demeanour and avoid *oonch neech*, the possibility of sexual relations outside marriage. Fear of sexual relations is not limited to sexual violence or forced sexual encounters, but also the idea that girls may choose to exercise their sexual agency. Both of these bring "dishonour" and shame to the family. Most parents articulated this fear of *oonch neech* as one that pushes down the age of marriage, and as a reason to reduce the girl's mobility or to otherwise exert control over her before marriage.

In a system that wishes to control female sexuality, acknowledging that girls can have sexual agency and desires is a threat. The anxiety caused by this is so strong that even conversations around contraception and safe sex are shameful and actively discouraged, lest they give adolescents the "wrong ideas." Because of this, all sexual encounters outside of marriage are spoken about in terms of force or trickery. Society only sees girls as innocent bystanders tricked into an encounter by the

28 Greenhalgh 1985; Wolf 1992; United Nations 1987.

man,<sup>29</sup> while girls learn to play the part and ignore or deny their desires. This is paired with a fear of teenage pregnancy because children born outside of marriage are not socially accepted.

In Bihar, when a 16-year-old boy and a 14-year-old girl decided to run away from their village, a police report was filed against the boy's parents by the local NGO, along with the anti-trafficking committee. The girl's family mobilised 300 people outside the boy's home, insisting that the boy's family bring the young couple back; as the girl was a daughter of the community, she symbolized the honour of the community and this was a matter of the "daughter's honour."

A fear of *kharab mahaul* (the corrupted external environment) was articulated repeatedly across states, especially with the sensationalized reporting of cases of rape and violence against women in public spaces. While the fear of violence outside the home is a real one, there is silence around issues of sexual violence within the marital family, indicating that it is not violence as much as sex outside the legitimacy of marriage that is the problem. Furthermore, if society is reluctant to acknowledge sexual violence in a marital home, society feigns complete ignorance about sexual violence in the natal family. In Andhra Pradesh, an elderly woman was left with no option but to get her granddaughter married in order to help her escape the sexual abuse she endured from her father. In another interview in Andhra Pradesh, a woman said, "A girl may wear 10 burkhas, but she will be violated, and what happens in the bedroom one will never know until you put a camera there."<sup>30</sup>

*In a system that wishes to control female sexuality, acknowledging that girls can have sexual agency and desires is a threat. The anxiety caused by this is so strong that even conversations around contraception and safe sex are shameful and actively discouraged, lest they give adolescents the "wrong ideas."*

The overall attitude toward sexuality is negative, and there is no space to acknowledge adolescent sexuality and desires without being shamed or facing severe consequences. These attitudes mean that adolescents

29 "Humari ladki ko behla phusla ke le gaya" ("He charmed our daughter and took her away")—Parents of 14-year-old girl, Gaya, Bihar.

30 Interview with the staff member of a women's collective.

themselves don't see sex before marriage as an option and sometimes choose to marry young as a way to satisfy desires. Some adolescents find each other outside of arranged marriages and choose to elope, often at the cost of severing ties with their communities forever. But many others marry the person arranged by their parents in order to fulfil their desires without drastic repercussions. Since these norms create a rigid environment, parents who seek control, as well as young people who wish to exercise their sexual agency, have little choice but marriage.

Early and child marriage is, ironically, both a consequence of people eloping and an effort to prevent it. Those parents who fear that a child will elope often get the child married early, an example of how the ultimate fear is often not about sexual activity or teenage pregnancy, but about losing control over their children and their sexuality.

*"A girl may wear 10 burkhas, but she will be violated, and what happens in the bedroom one will never know until you put a camera there."*

—FEMALE INTERVIEW RESPONDENT

Globalisation further accentuates these anxieties by creating easy access to media and communication technology, which facilitate communication and enable adolescents to meet their partners. Mobile technology loosens parental control over adolescents and increases the possibility that they will choose their own partners and even become sexually active. Early and child marriage in this case is a way in which parents reassert their control. With increasing exposure to the media, boys and girls aspire toward different lifestyles and can develop a certain vision of romantic love and companionship; such visions have led to a growth in couples eloping. Many mothers expressed their annoyance with TV serials and movies in which boys and girls fall in love because now their sisters and daughters want to fall in love, too.<sup>31</sup>

In communities with less restrictive attitudes toward sexuality, as mentioned earlier, the age of marriage is higher. That correlation was visible in our visits to certain tribal communities, and in certain areas of the country, like Assam, the state in northeast India with a low incidence of early and child marriage, alongside a more "open" attitude toward sex.<sup>32</sup> Within the secondary literature as well, there is evidence to show that age

31 Focus group discussion with women's group in Rajasthan.

32 See Caldwell 1998.

at marriage is lower and the practice of early and child marriage more widespread in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia in general, where attitudes toward women's sexuality and its control are more rigid in comparison to Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>33</sup>

## GENDER NORMS AND MASCULINITY

Norms, as we highlighted earlier, are ways in which societies are able to reproduce structural inequalities. Gender norms, like caste or religious norms, have the same effect. We understand how norms of femininity can be oppressive for women, and how deeply held ideas of marriage are tied to them through constructs of the “good wife,” the “good daughter-in-law” and the “good woman.” A less-explored area is the impact of gender norms on men and the ways they influence decision-making around marriage.

Masculinity is the set of gender norms related to men. In acknowledging masculinity as a problem, we argue that today's men are not the source of patriarchy but are, just like women, restricted by its rigid gender norms. Because this is a less-explored area of inquiry, there is silence on the links between masculinity and early and child marriage. The perceptions of masculinity held by three groups of people—fathers of girls, fathers of boys and boys themselves—play a particularly important role in decisions around early and child marriage.

The perceived masculinity of a girl's father lies in his ability to control her sexuality. Should a girl have sex or get married without his consent, her father loses credibility within the community. He will probably be ousted from community forums, since participation is linked to honour and only “respectable” men take part. That fear of shame, and loss of masculinity, pushes many fathers to control their daughters. In an interview in Rajasthan, a father who had resisted marrying his daughters at a young age told us he did so because “as long as they are in my control, I don't need to get them married.” Though he avoided marriage, he made his daughter quit studying after eighth grade in order to exert such control.

For fathers of boys, a key component of masculinity is being able to maintain power in the house. Boys at the precipice of adolescence start developing their own notions of masculinity based on interactions with peers and the outside world that adolescent masculinity may clash with the father or may not find space for expression within the household. In this power struggle between the

father's masculinity and the son's, the father may exert control by getting the son married. Once he has a wife, the son's reliance on his father increases, as does the father's ability to exercise power over both the boy and his wife. Thus, marriages are often used as a means to tame errant boys or boys who do not follow gender norms. By putting family responsibilities on them, fathers make sure that their sons conform to the norms of patriarchy, where they are expected to provide for their family and become responsible heads of the family.

*A less-explored area is the impact of gender norms on men and the ways they influence decision-making around marriage. Masculinity is the set of gender norms related to men. In acknowledging masculinity as a problem, we argue that today's men are not the source of patriarchy but are, just like women, restricted by its rigid gender norms.*

An adolescent boy who is exploring his own masculinity may choose to marry early, as his bride offers a way of exercising his emerging sense of power. However, it is not just a simple matter of a boy finding a weaker target; he is expected by society to control his wife and is told to do so from the first days of married life. Young married boys we interviewed in the field described the pressure they felt from parents to discipline their wives, and said that sometimes they resort to violence against their young wives to please their parents. In these interviews, some boys also shared that they sometimes feel conflicted about the expectations of masculinity, and frustration for not being able to live up to their manly responsibilities, particularly providing for their new family. The majority of boys married at an early age do not have a viable and sustainable source of income to support themselves and their expanding families. This creates a lot of stress and shame, which may lead to violence. In some cases the young couple depends on one or both of their fathers to shoulder some of their responsibilities. Thus, their families, and especially the boy's father, can push these young husbands to control their wives and make them follow the norms of the parents.

## EDUCATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL GAPS

For India's girls, especially in rural areas, going to school is about much more than merely attending classes. Pitted against these girls are strong patriarchal norms that undermine the value of their education, finding it scarcely

33 See, for example, Samara and Singh 1996.

valuable in their eventual destiny to be married and tend to the household. Even when education for girls in India is free and compulsory according to government policy, parents are not always convinced of its merits.

Over the years, this mindset is slowly changing in favour of universal education. But that shift doesn't necessarily lead to empowerment. With a heavily gendered school curriculum, parents find that schools are an important space for the socialization of their daughters into "good girls," adept with skills for the modern world. Fathers find that their girls are more "sensible" when they go to school, and that once they are educated they can teach others in her family.

For many girls, school is a space for friendship and learning, one away from the household. It may not always be empowering for all girls, but it has the potential to help girls have aspirations for their lives that are beyond marriage. For those parents who wish to send their daughters to school, and for girls who wish to study, accessing education is not always easy. Over and above restrictive norms, girls often have to travel long distances to find institutional education. Sometimes the lack of schools ends girls' education. It is important to note that the lack of institutions exaggerates the fact that a girl's education is viewed as a secondary priority to her labour in the household, but this lack of alternative institutional spaces reduces the bargaining power of young girls to resist marriage and to find alternative activities and aspirations.

*The trade-off for being "allowed" higher education is a greater conformity to the norms of a "good girl" who can be trusted to "do the right thing" and stay on the "right path," which usually implies staying away from romantic relationships and ceding control over other parts of their lives.*

For those girls who wish to continue their education, they are compelled to negotiate for this freedom from their parents. The trade-off for being "allowed" higher education is a greater conformity to the norms of a "good girl" who can be trusted to "do the right thing" and stay on the "right path," which usually implies staying away from romantic relationships and ceding control over other parts of their lives. In addition, the content and pedagogy of the mainstream educational system lacks any focus on girls' empowerment or

other ideas that could help girls in their negotiations around marriage.

Within these limits, physical infrastructure plays a big role in the negotiating power girls have; the proximity of the school to the home is especially important. The farther the school, the more chances there are for sexual violence or for girls exercising their own sexual agency, leaving parents restless about their safety and reputation. If the school is far, the travel time lost in commuting may be too high given the demands of girls' labour within the household, thus reducing their ability to negotiate. Even for parents who wish to send their daughters to school, these factors are deterrents. Once the girl has been pulled out of education, the next step is to find her a suitable match. Parents don't want her to "just be sitting idle at home."

The lack of alternate institutional spaces compels girls to live with their parents where they are vulnerable to the everyday pressures from family and community to marry early. Similar norms around gender and sexuality prevent girls from accessing alternate spaces of education or livelihood, even if they are in close proximity. The difference here is between the physical availability of alternate spaces and the actual ability of girls to access these spaces after negotiating norms and societal pressures. Boys, by contrast, are rarely made to drop out of school because of physical distance or other infrastructural gaps, which points to underlying patriarchal perceptions on mobility, education and sexuality that limit access for girls.

## CENTRALITY OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is central to the aspirations and life plans of a vast majority of individuals across the country. The collective importance placed on this life event means that everyone has little choice but to engage with the institution. While some may try to negotiate when, how and to whom they get married, others accept this as a given and adapt their worldview, aspirations and desires around it.

For society, marriage alone is not the objective; more important is that each marriage should be an "ideal match." That ideal begins with heteronormativity, and a complete denial of same-sex couples and trans people. Further, both bride and groom are expected to be from the same caste and religion. Inter-caste marriages are looked down upon, while inter-religious marriages are close to unacceptable in much of Indian society. As for class, it is expected that women will only marry someone from the same or higher class as them. The same is true for age and education.

The role of such norms is to ensure that marriages do not challenge the existing order of society. These norms are deeply internalized at every level of society. No amount of wealth, education or exposure to alternatives can sufficiently alter these norms by itself. Love marriages, and attempts by young adults to exercise their own choices, pose a threat to these norms, and early and child marriage at its heart seeks to avoid that.

Not only are love marriages a taboo, but a girl who resists her parents' wishes to marry her to a match of their choice is also looked down upon. In Rajasthan, we asked members of one panchayat what options might be available to a girl should she want to resist or exit a forced marriage, other than suicide or running away; the panchayat members could not think of any solution for such a case. In Jharkhand, a Child Development Protection Officer (CDPO) informed us that they proactively dissuade such girls from seeking out the local administration, as there is no infrastructure available to support them. Another CDPO in Andhra Pradesh declared that girls who resist marriage are part of the problem and thus should not be supported at all. Indeed, marriage is so central that young adults are often

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eager for it as well. Some young adults dream about “love marriages,” of course. But for many others, marriage is a means to satisfy sexual desires or access the mobility and freedom reserved for adults; in addition, there is often a deep desire for the romance associated with the act and ritual of marriage itself. Often, the dreams of young people are limited to those that can be accessed through marriage. Not all communities in the country follow such rigid practices around marriage. We came across certain tribal communities where living together with one's person of choice is a common practice, such that couples may start cohabiting when they find a match and conduct a marriage ceremony when it is logistically convenient. In some cases couples even run away and return a few years later, and are accepted back into the family and

community following the required festivities, such as feeding the village. But such practices, which can be considered liberal and arguably offer better options for individuals entering marriage, are slowly being pushed further to the margins, particularly with the increasing conversions of lower caste and tribal populations to Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. For many of these communities, adopting practices of upper-caste Hindus is a sign of upward mobility, a move that is tacitly welcomed and encouraged by the state and other mainstream institutions. For this reason, age at marriage is now decreasing in some communities that formerly had a lower incidence of early and child marriage.

## VULNERABILITY, RISK AND UNCERTAINTY

We discussed earlier how poverty is an economic symptom of the structural inequalities which influence decisions around marriage. Poverty in India is an everyday reality, but there is little cognisance of the vulnerability experienced as a result of poverty and the uncertainty that results without regular access to basic material resources such as food, clothing and shelter. Within this context, risks are experienced more acutely and from a variety of sources, including changing economic structures, agrarian distress, land grabs and migration.

Uncertainty is also experienced more acutely within a fast-changing society, where broadened possibilities—including everything from school education, to possibilities of employment outside of one's family, to exposure to media—reduces a family's control over its children's lives. Decision-making around marriage is a dynamic process, as we have seen, and happens at the intersection of numerous factors. Within a rapidly globalising society, in particular, risk and uncertainty create anxiety, reinforcing the perception that marriage is one of the only sources of security within a family and the larger community.

Those families vulnerable to poverty are in an even more precarious position, and may get their children married whenever they have access to funds, especially amid nationwide agrarian crises and radically changing markets. The feeling of vulnerability, however, is not exclusively a problem of poverty. With sex-selective abortions, migration and the desire for upward mobility, families fear not being able to find partners for their children that match their expectations of an “ideal marriage,” despite the problems with these norms.

Amid this heightened vulnerability, certain regions are known to have high rates of early and child marriage—these regions are also prone either to natural disasters

like floods or droughts, or political and communal tensions. For example, In Assam, areas that are more prone to floods have a higher rate of early and child marriage.<sup>34</sup> Particularly where these crises are increasing, families are more likely to marry their daughters early. Similarly, in areas with greater communal tensions, especially within minority communities that live in a state of heightened threat, marriages are seen as the only way to safeguard girls and send them off when their honour is still intact. In Muzaffarnagar, following the riots of 2013, mass child marriages took place, funded by religious groups who believe that there is nothing more righteous than providing girls security through marriage.<sup>35</sup> These examples show how the dynamic landscape of marriage is further altered by changing perceptions of risk or vulnerability. In addition, these examples are often exaggerated displays of structural root causes, again reminding us that early and child marriage cannot be sufficiently addressed without addressing root causes.

*Within a rapidly globalising society risk and uncertainty create anxiety, reinforcing the perception that marriage is one of the only sources of security within a family and the larger community.*

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## AGE AS AN AXIS OF POWER

Above we have explored structures of power based on gender, sexuality, class, caste and religion. Here we point to a final structure of power that is seldom recognized—age. Children and young adults are viewed by society as needing protection and guidance. It is believed that they don't know what decisions are best, as they lack the experience and perspective that you acquire with age. This mindset strips them of agency in their own lives, and makes them vulnerable to societal norms and rules enforced by parents and other adults.

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34 Cooke 2013.

35 Ummid 2013.

Marrying underage out of choice is looked down upon, and families as well as communities go to many lengths to avoid and revert such marriages. Some families file false cases against the boy in question as a way to separate the young couple. Sometimes boys and girls face extreme violence as retaliation from the community for choosing their own partners.

At the same time, of course, communities fiercely protect the very same practice of early and child marriage when the marriage takes place under parental consent and within socially sanctioned norms. This difference shows that young people's lack of agency is not because they are unable to make good decisions, but that society bestows agency with age: those who are older generally have greater power over decision-making. Since age, and age difference, influences the way in which we engage with one another, age can be considered an axis across which young people are left disempowered from the decision-making process around marriage.

## CONCLUSION

We hope to broaden the existing discourse in order to recognize the root causes of early and child marriage, and in particular to include vulnerability, uncertainty and risk, gender norms and masculinity, and the role that age plays as an axis of power. Some of the root causes we identify in the report can be found in the existing literature; others, particularly those listed above, are our contribution to the existing literature, and we believe they must be examined in greater depth in order to gain a cohesive picture of the multitude of factors that influence decision-making around marriage. We hope to have demonstrated that not all of these factors have a direct effect on age of marriage, but rather, that they exist in complex interplays based on the structures that drive them and that they are highly dynamic and responsive to external changes. As a result, simplistic interventions that deal with one factor will not be effective; a holistic engagement with root causes is required.



## *Impacts*

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Within the development sector, there is a clear understanding of two primary impacts of early and child marriage: on education, as girls and boys are forced to drop out of school, and on the health of young women, especially linked to early pregnancy. In this section, we'll expand our focus, based on a deeper understanding of root causes, to see these two widely recognized impacts anew and to recognize the broader range of impacts of early and child marriage.

## EDUCATION

Education has a complex relationship with gender and empowerment. It is widely seen as a corrupting force, raising awareness among girls and giving them opportunities to explore outside the boundaries of the home. Girls who try to stay in school need to constantly prove the trust of their natal family, both to access education in the first place and then to prove that their education will help them be a better bride. In the even more complicated setting of the marital home, the young bride is only able to study as much as her husband has. In many cases, in Rajasthan and elsewhere, we were told of girls who were made to drop out of school (after marriage but before their *gauna*) because their husbands had dropped out.

Young brides, burdened with new household responsibilities, often lack familial support to continue their education and find their ability to negotiate with their marital family, especially relating to matters of education, is far lower than in their natal family. The young women who do manage to return to school after marriage often find it difficult, because of stigmas associated with marriage within school peer groups and because of how much their lives have changed. Schools do not make accommodations for the particular needs of young married brides, further excluding them from the system. Boys often face similar difficulties, as they are forced out of school and into unskilled labour as a way to support their new families. These intertwined challenges to further education reproduce the cycle of poverty.

## HEALTH

The development sector has focused on issues related only to reproductive health. The inability of a woman to negotiate contraceptive use, especially in a situation where the bride is forced to prove her fertility as soon as she is married, is a major issue [as mentioned in our discussion on demographics of incidence]. While more than 90 percent of women know about various methods of contraception, only 20-30 percent are actually able to

use them.<sup>36</sup> The rarity of contraceptive use, then, leads to high rates of abortions, miscarriages, and maternal and infant mortality.

In addition, there are many other facets of health that have not been sufficiently explored. In Rajasthan, where a women's collective had done extensive work, the women we interviewed incisively articulated the sexual and reproductive health issues of early and child marriage. Reflecting on the impact of early and child marriage on their own health, women said their overall health had deteriorated, that their immunity had dropped and that they were more vulnerable to other diseases. This assessment reveals underlying structural and discriminatory practices that can impact the overall health of women and that is manifested in countless ways, everything from not getting sufficient nutrition because the marital family is fed first, to the fear that reporting a disease or sickness will affect the way in which the young bride is perceived. There is a high premium on a "healthy" young bride, physically able to contribute to household chores, and a bride seen as weak or unhealthy is often stigmatized as a liability rather than an asset. The current discourse on health is too focused on early pregnancy, and thus we must expand the discussion to include the other factors, such as the politics of nutrition and access to food within the household, that lead to the poor health of young brides.

*Reflecting on the impact of early and child marriage on their own health, women said their overall health had deteriorated, that their immunity had dropped and that they were more vulnerable to other diseases.*

Another important but grossly underrepresented element of early and child marriage is its impact on mental health. Young brides we interviewed described their initial years of marriage as being in a daze, of feeling lost and under pressure. Even in an area of Jharkhand with a few interventions from the development sector, women argued that the mental stress caused by early and child marriage has an impact on young brides' physical well-being. In all, these various pressures of early and child marriage leave the young bride vulnerable to poor health, both in mind and body.

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36 National Family Health Survey 2006.

## GENDER AND SEXUALITY

For the young bride, the marital home creates multiple levels of powerlessness. Not only is she vulnerable to her in-laws, and their judgment of her ability to handle household responsibilities and adjust to a new family, she now lives within the skewed power dynamics of husband and wife. The needs of the groom, and the larger family, are paramount, which often means that the bride's own needs and desires are kept secondary. Her bodily integrity—her ability to control what happens with her body—is compromised because the family and larger community scrutinize decisions regarding sexual activity and contraception. The new bride is pressured to get pregnant early on to prove her fertility. If the new bride insists on using contraception, or fails to get pregnant, she may face stigma, or violence, or may even be abandoned by her husband.

*For the young bride, the marital home creates multiple levels of powerlessness: the family and larger community scrutinize decisions regarding sexual activity and contraception. If a young bride expresses desire, she is suspect. The young bride is expected to conform to the gender norms of a “good married woman”; if she resists, she may face violence and aggression.*

Bodily integrity needs to be looked at from the perspective of positive and negative sexuality. While the girl's ability to say no to sex is compromised after the wedding, so, too, is her ability to express desire. Girls are expected not to have knowledge regarding their desires, and if a young bride expresses desire, she is suspect. The young bride is expected to conform to the gender norms of a “good married woman”; if she resists, she may face violence and aggression. It is commonly said that eventually the bride “learns to adjust” to these norms, and may perform against her own wishes in order to leverage other gains.

Pressures of gender weigh heavy on the groom as well. Peer groups are often the only source of information about sex for men, so when the groom can impose his sexual will over his new bride, that acts as a marker of his own masculinity within the peer group. Men in interviews spoke of using drugs or alcohol to overcome their anxieties when they started having sex. Paired with the

aggressive standards of masculinity, a reliance on alcohol or drugs for intimacy can slip into an addiction and can heighten the already present threat of domestic violence.

Beyond these intimate issues, a man is also held responsible for his wife's conduct within the household and is expected to discipline his wife. This puts additional pressure on the groom, both to use coercion or violence if necessary, and also to be able to support his household without help from parents. A part of the socialization of men involves their ability to control and assert themselves, an ability that is inevitably tested within marriage; the newly married wife is therefore also faced with her husband's experiments with exerting power. Thus, while gender norms and attitudes toward sexuality are a root cause of early and child marriage, sexuality and gender are also deeply impacted by early and child marriage.

## LIVELIHOOD

As mentioned earlier, early and child marriage is a process of bartering a girl's labour potential. After marriage, a young bride often takes over household responsibilities from older women in the family, thus freeing them for wage labour. In this way, even if the young bride is unable to earn an income, her labour is crucial for others to earn an income. In some cases, the bride is able to find paying work outside the house, since the threat of sexual relations to and from work is mitigated by her marriage. But in general, a woman's ability to earn a living diminishes with marriage, a key impact of early and child marriage in particular and yet one that is given very little attention within the development sector.

Early and child marriage can prompt adolescents to drop out of school and enrol in the unskilled workforce, as we have seen, which in turn tends to reproduce work conditions that are exploitative and stereotyped by gender (in areas like weaving and stitching, for example). Especially for girls, who are economically vulnerable to their husbands, earning a living is often difficult, not least because they don't have the skills required, but also because they often lack the authority to negotiate with their marital families to even seek paid employment. But unlike boys, who enter into the labour market with the onset of married life, even women who eventually work are typically absent from the labour market for the first several years of marriage, while they establish their fertility and credibility in the marital home.

After the wife has assuaged the marital family's anxieties about her sexuality, and has given the family a few

children, she may be expected to work as an unskilled labourer. Early and child marriage also results in a lack of aspirations for, or exploration of, gainful employment, as girls often see their life situation as unchangeable. They are burdened with, and subsumed by, domestic responsibility so early that they have no mental or physical space to think of any alternatives, which makes them more dependent on, and vulnerable to, their husbands and families.

## CONCLUSION

By broadening the development community's understanding of the impacts of the practice of early and child marriage, we can bring about a change in the way those who seek to address this issue frame both their goals and strategies, ensuring that both encapsulate and consider the full spectrum of the complexities of the issue. In this way, interventions, funders and other stakeholders in the development sector will be able to build a nuanced and comprehensive response to early and child marriage that recognizes the diversity of the problem and the need for diverse, holistic solutions.

## *Interventions*

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We visited 19 organisations and interacted with more than 50 others through interviews and the aforementioned national consultation around early and child marriage. Here we provide a broad landscape overview of the kinds of organisations working in the field. To be clear, there is enormous variety among these organisations; no two are alike. But for the sake of clarity, we have categorized organisations into two groups: those focused on age at marriage and those focused on empowerment. No organisation fits solely into just one category, but each can be characterized by primarily having one of these orientations to early and child marriage, which makes the patterns instructive. These patterns were generated based on theory of change exercises conducted with the organisations: they were asked to articulate why early and child marriage is a problem; what their long-term goals are to solve it; how they wish to approach the issue; and what their strategies and the thematic areas are in which they work. As a result of this exercise, it is clear that not all organisations working on early and child marriage articulate the problem in the same way. Their visions of long-term solutions are, in turn, based on those articulations, which, in turn, influence their approaches toward problem solving, the strategies they employ and the thematic areas they work on.

## ARTICULATION OF THE PROBLEM

A number of organisations that work on, or whose work impacts, early and child marriage don't actually articulate their involvement in the issue. For example, an organisation working on education advocates that families enrol their daughters in school every consecutive year because, knowing the patterns in their community, if a girl is enrolled into school in fifth grade she will be more likely to continue until seventh grade, and if enrolled in eighth grade she will be more likely to continue until 10th grade, and so on. The organisation is aware that the longer girls stay in school the longer they can avert marriage, or at least cohabitation (*gauna*), but they don't articulate this goal for fear of alienating the community. In many cases, like this one, challenging marriage norms is seen as a threat to society and is not received kindly. In a similar context, an organisation that was more vocal about its work on early and child marriage received threats to their fieldworkers, some of which materialised into near-lethal physical assaults.

Despite these consequences, many organisations do explicitly articulate that they work on early and child marriage. But these articulations vary. On one extreme, there are organisations that find underage marriage their primary problem. These groups see early and child

marriage as a violation of child rights and believe that even if they can protect children from the practice for a year or two, that is still a substantial achievement. For such organisations, the desires of the individuals getting married and the impact of marriage on their lives are secondary.

*A number of organisations that work on, or whose work impacts early and child marriage don't actually articulate their involvement in the issue because challenging marriage norms is seen as a threat to society. One organisation even received threats that materialised into near-lethal physical assaults.*

For example, in the field with one of these organisations, we heard about a case which they cited as a failure for themselves. A 16-year-old girl named Manisha was the leader of a youth group started by the organisation and wished to marry a boy of her choice. Following pressure from the community and the organisation, the marriage was briefly called off, but a few months later, she married the same boy at a temple in another village. Manisha currently lives in a city pursuing her education. However, for the organisation, the marriage was a betrayal, as the group believes it sets "the wrong example for other adolescents." These organisations find issues of choice and consent to be beyond the scope of their work, which is restricted to ensuring that marriages take place after the legal age.

For such organisations, there is little or no room for choice and consent, and if it is discussed at all, it must be after the legal age. Desires of adolescents are barely spoken about; the focus is on protecting them from their own "bad decisions," which obviously hints at unprotected sex and teenage pregnancy. Despite these hints, sexuality is not a part of the official articulation, "lest it give adolescents any wrong ideas." For these organisations, marrying before the legal age is so problematic that in one case where a fieldworker's daughter married at 17, the fieldworker was asked to leave the organisation; for other members, whose children married at 18, they were there to partake in the celebrations. Many of these organisations have repeated to us, "once a child is 18 we proactively get them married with great furor," even if this marriage is still not out of choice or forced by the parents. This counterproductive emphasis emerges because the discourse is driven from the top down and not informed by the local realities or root causes of early and child marriage.

With a similar focus on legal age, most organisations articulate early and child marriage as a problem because of its perceived impacts on adolescents, particularly girls. As we've highlighted in earlier sections, these negative impacts are limited to early pregnancy and health risks, and girls dropping out of school. For many of these organisations, their interest in the issue stems from their casework with survivors of domestic violence, and they believe that the younger the bride, the more likely she is to suffer from abuse. However, when they interact with the community, this is rarely the reason they articulate when convincing people against marrying too young. Rather, they emphasize the dominant discourse of the state and the development sector—poor health (particularly sexual and reproductive health) and dropping out of school. Because this is an acquired articulation (in that it is driven down, along with funding) rather than one stemming from the fieldworkers' own experiences, it is merely reproduced in the field rather than emerging from the field.

In some cases this gets blown out of proportion, like in Rajasthan, where a fieldworker introduced us to a frail woman and told us that her health suffered greatly because she was married young. The woman explained, as fieldworkers had explained to her, that marrying too young leads to a drop in immunity to diseases like tuberculosis and cancer. On probing further, however, we found that she had never had children, so her health issues were more likely linked to other problems, like poor nutrition, than to early pregnancy.

*The children could see from their parents' examples and from stories of friends around them that marrying young is not a solution to their perceived problems.*

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Organisations that work on young adults' choice and rights add a new layer to existing discourse. This work has two dimensions: the first is assisting those who wish to resist marriage and the second is assisting (or counselling) those who wish to marry a partner of their choice but are underage. The organisations that do the former may not do the latter and vice versa. Most of these organisations articulate the problem of early and child marriage as one of disempowerment. However, it is difficult to generalise these organisations because they all take diverse approaches and strategies toward empowerment that are informed by local specificities and thus vary from one to the other.

Finally, there are those organisations, albeit very few, that include critical conversations around marriage

itself within their articulation. For these organisations, the articulation is a feminist one that looks at marriage as an institution that reproduces patriarchy. They view norms around marriage, including, but not limited to, age, as manifestations of structural inequalities. These organisations are much more focused on the violation of the agency of young adults in a marriage, with an emphasis on their desires. Because there is a more constructive conversation around desire, most of these organisations articulate problems arising from unprotected sex, teenage pregnancy and sexual activity at a young age. They acknowledge that even as adolescents should have the space to exercise their choices, they should do so with full knowledge of its implications.

This is a risky step, since it makes working within communities much more difficult. Some of the strongest critiques of marriage came from organisations that worked with commercial sex workers or children of commercial sex workers. While many of the sex workers had chosen their work as an escape from bad marriages (some of them had married as children), the children of sex workers could see from their parents' examples and from stories of friends around them that marrying young is not a solution to their perceived problems.

There are some other organisations working in very orthodox communities, but whose strong critique makes them completely different from the organisations mentioned earlier. Most of these organisations articulate their stance as a feminist, political one, and are often wary of receiving funding that may require them to change their stance.

The range of articulations of why early and child marriage is problematic is indicative of a similar diversity we found at every stage of the theory of change. The long-term goals explored next are in many ways influenced by the articulation of the problem.

## LONG-TERM GOALS

For those organisations that don't articulate early and child marriage as their problem, their long-term goals may be linked to their core area of work, for example reducing the rate of dropouts, or ensuring that all girls complete schooling up to 12th grade.

Among those that do, a large number express their goal as establishing an area that is *bal-vivah mukt* (free of child marriage). For these organisations, numerical measurement and targets take precedence over other aspects of their work, often against the will of the organisation itself. Because funding is often driven by

what organisations articulate as their vision and goal, grassroots organisations that struggle for funds feel compelled to align themselves to the vision of the development sector that wishes to “end the practice of child marriage.” We spoke to various organisations that would much rather articulate their long-term goals as that of empowering adolescents and adopt completely different strategies in the field, but are often reduced to this limited definition of goals, with the hope that they may be able to subversively use funds for what they truly wish to implement. In this conflict, they are torn between their own goals and goals enforced on them, struggling to balance both.

*Because funding is often driven by what organisations articulate as their vision and goal, grassroots organisations that struggle for funds feel compelled to align themselves to the vision of the development sector.*

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Organisations with a focus on young people also vary in how they express their goals. Some rights-based organisations see their long-term goal as providing young people with information and access to their rights. The rights discourse offers a comprehensive list of all such rights that young people should have access to, including the right to choice, education, health, livelihoods and even leisure. Other organisations focus on empowering young people to be financially independent, educated and employable.

Many organisations view their goal as creating access to alternative spaces for young people. They wish to create physical spaces that young people can access when they wish to resist the pressures on marriage, while others want to create alternative life options, such as skills, professions and careers that can help young people break away from their existing lives, including forced marriage.

Finally, there are those organisations that wish to create critical dialogue among young people and among the community around marriage. They wish to create spaces where the norms of marriage and the links to patriarchy, sexuality, caste and class can be explored.

## APPROACHES

Unlike the articulation of the problem and long-term goals, which can be singular and precisely defined, organisations use multiple approaches to address early

and child marriage. Because of this, it is also difficult to draw simple linear links between types of organisations and the approaches they use. But there is definitely a tendency for certain articulations to attract certain approaches, and in this section we offer broad correlations to illustrate how the way we articulate problems and goals can influence our approaches.

### CHILD-CENTRIC VS. ADOLESCENT-CENTRIC

We have argued for a move away from “child marriage” and toward “early marriage” to incorporate the complexity of adolescence into the discourse. Here we differentiate between these two perspectives and how each influence an organisation’s approach. Children are usually viewed as disempowered because of their young age, and thus in need of protection from someone who is more powerful and, thus, someone who is older. They are considered to have fewer capacities to make important decisions about their lives, and need adult supervision and guidance. An approach that views its primary benefactors as children also follows the same mindset. Thus, a child-centric approach leaves no room for young people to express themselves, and what they have to say will mostly be viewed from the lens of needing to be corrected, protected or guided.

On the contrary, adolescence is characterized as an age when individuals first start to exercise their agency. While much of this agency is rebellious against parental, or societal, control, many of the concerns raised by adolescents are honest critiques of oppressive social structures, like forced marriage. Approaches that are adolescent-centric look to create spaces for critical dialogue and counselling across generations. Far from trivializing their problems, these approaches recognize that adolescents are struggling to understand their own agency and role in society, and seek to empower them to do so more meaningfully. This approach is also more empathetic to young people’s own desires, which may often clash with societal norms and lead to hard consequences. By allowing young people a space to express and fulfil their desires (in varying capacities), this approach empowers young people to make better decisions about their own lives.

### INSTRUMENTAL VS. EMPOWERING

An instrumental approach is one that uses strategies or platforms that can be spaces for broader social change to drive down a limited agenda. For example, enrolling girls in school so as to avoid their marriage is an instrumental take on education in addressing early and child marriage. Such approaches are widespread in the field; they are

often seen as pragmatic, “quick-fix” solutions for an otherwise complex issue that may seem too daunting to address all at once. Especially with marriage, where attitudes have been evolving at a glacial pace over centuries, many interventions don’t try to confront the institution itself, but instead use other means to strategically avoid early and child marriage.

Empowering approaches try to influence the same spaces (or create alternatives ones) in order to help young people engage in society more meaningfully. For example, when mainstream education reinforces the ideas of a patriarchal society, including ideas of what a “good girl” is, that education may further disempower young girls, rather than enabling them to challenge an oppressive social order. When the reasons given to educate a girl are so that she will be able to aid her husband and marital family, rather than so that she can participate in various spheres of society, girls are relegated to the restrictive life of the household. Indeed, if merely being a better wife is the final outcome of education, whether that education ends at 16 or 18 may make little difference to a girl’s life. Ironically, this is something communities understand thoroughly, though they are often sceptical that anything about the education system can change.

## **SYMPTOMS VS. ROOT CAUSES**

A classic example of an approach informed solely by symptoms is an intervention that tries to address teenage pregnancy without understanding young people’s desires or sexuality. Such an approach often takes existing structural inequalities as givens. Without a critical examination of root causes, such an approach leads to strategies that are often forceful (like the use of law) or moralistic, with a liberal use of shaming as a tactic to “solve” the problem.

Such an approach is definitely easier than the alternative: engaging with the root causes. Structural issues are difficult to combat, especially when there are many people and many practices that reinforce the status quo, both actively and passively. These kinds of approaches require individuals and groups to collectively take a stand in opposition to long-standing practices or in favour of certain attitudes (a positive, rather than negative, attitude toward sexuality, for example). They may even involve breaking the silence and speaking up about an issue that many others feel uncomfortable with and choose to work around.

Because early and child marriage is a pervasive practice, and almost everyone gets married following the same societal norms, communities are aware of the problems

that arise from it. In one of our conversations with the patriarchs of a community, for example, everyone unanimously agreed that if a couple isn’t well matched, and doesn’t understand each other, then both of their lives will be ruined. They acknowledged that as a result, it is problematic that the two people involved don’t have a say in this decision. Further, the men recognized that if the marriage is done too early, it could sour the relationship of two families.

*Structural issues are difficult to combat, especially when there are many people and many practices that reinforce the status quo. These kinds of approaches require individuals and groups to collectively take a stand, breaking the silence and speaking up about an issue that many others feel uncomfortable with and choose to work around.*

Such concerns, we found, are widely understood within the community, yet find no space in the discourse of interventions whose approaches are not based on local contexts. Such organisations rely on the approach of the state or the development sector to speak about the potential harm from early and child marriage (early pregnancy and dropping out of school). Yet, for the community, these two issues often do not seem as problematic because issues with pregnancy and health care are more about access to state services than about age. Teenage pregnancy is common in these villages; only very few of them end in death or similarly extreme outcomes.

A mismatch between development discourse and local understanding leads communities to take interventions less seriously and thus interventions are less effective. That mismatch also reduces the intervention’s ability to create a space for a two-way dialogue about these issues and whatever spaces are created tend toward dishonest conversation.

If an intervention’s approach is informed by root causes, and critically examines gender, patriarchy and the institution of marriage, that intervention needs a strong support system; spaces for conversations and capacity-building; and spaces to share struggles and share strategies for speaking about contentious issues. It is not surprising, then, that very few organisations are able to take this approach entirely. Most organisations we spoke to confessed at this being a gap in their approach that

they did not know how to fill, even though they wanted to. Organisations could also see how limiting themselves to the symptoms compromises the efficacy of their efforts and were enthusiastic to learn ways to improve on that.

## BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE VS. ATTITUDINAL CHANGE

Behavioural change is a popular approach for interventions that are linked particularly to matters of sexuality. Because it is an uncomfortable topic to engage with, both personally and within large groups, these interventions typically focus only on changing risky behaviour rather than changing the underlying attitudes about that behaviour. Early HIV interventions, for example, aimed to create behavioural change through awareness and access to information about transmission and prevention. Following the failure of second-generation interventions that worked at individual psychosocial levels to bring about behavioural change, there was widespread agreement that such an approach is not enough.

*If an intervention's approach is informed by root causes, and critically examines gender, patriarchy and the institution of marriage, that intervention needs a strong support system for speaking about contentious issues.*

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When dealing with complex behaviours, we need to look at the larger structures that influence behaviours beyond immediate social relationships.<sup>37</sup> Because sexuality is so central to early and child marriage, behavioural-change approaches to the issue look similar in both cases. Many organisations that follow this approach believe that providing information about the harmful effects of early pregnancy and health risks will be sufficient to convince people against the practice—as if early and child marriage is the result of merely a gap in knowledge, and if that gap were filled people would understand or know better. But how foolish it is to think we can change behaviour when we're up against centuries of tradition, combined with the complex dynamics of globalisation.

Those approaches that also focus on attitudinal change understand that the decisions we each make as individuals exist within the broader context of structural and environmental factors, and therefore utilize collective action to address these structural issues.

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37 [http://www.who.int/hiv/strategic/surveillance/en/unaid99\\_27.pdf](http://www.who.int/hiv/strategic/surveillance/en/unaid99_27.pdf).

Organisations with such an approach create spaces for women's collectives or youth groups to come together and discuss issues of sexuality, gender, marriage, etc. In some cases, these spaces are strategically disguised to look like livelihood trainings or life-skills education, but it is in the subtleties of the kind of collective space that is created where the approach becomes visible. Because this approach focuses on the collective rather than the individual, and attitudes rather than behaviours, it is difficult to quantify and monitor.

## INDIVIDUAL ROLE MODELS VS. COLLECTIVE ACTION AND GROUP PROCESSES

For many organisations, each case of child marriage prevented is seen as a success. Such organisations find that showcasing individuals who avoided child marriage creates positive role models for other families to follow. Within their own communities, they seek out families that choose to marry their daughters later and profile them as examples to follow. A focus on behavioural change is at the very heart of such an approach, which hopes to inspire positive decision-making based purely on the fact that somebody else is doing so, without accounting for any of the structural reasons why families may be compelled to make certain decisions.

In one organisation, we learned about two sisters who were married early. One was made to cohabit with her husband immediately, leading her to drop out of school and face married life at a young age. The other sister's in-laws wished her to stay at her natal house and complete her education before moving to the marital home. The organisation showcased the latter as the "role model" and her sister as the bad example, without any acknowledgement that neither of them had any role in what happened. A similar set of role models, whose parents had urged them to study instead of marry, told us they were restricted from speaking to their friends who were married out of fear that talking about marriage and sex might tempt them to quit their education. Such role models embody the impulse of some organisations to deny or create silence around young people's own desires rather than engage with them.

Organisations committed to collective strategies avoid such role models in favour of creating spaces for dialogue and conversation. In Jharkhand, for example, we witnessed several organisations that worked with adolescent girls through sports and created a space in which girls could share their experiences of oppression and receive support and encouragement. However, even among collectives, it can be often difficult to push the boundaries of what is or is not spoken about; collectives can actually limit

the scope of the articulation of the problem, such as a collective in Rajasthan that actively resisted talking about sexuality because of negative attitudes toward it.

*Many organisations seek out families that choose to marry their daughters later and profile them as examples to follow. They hope to inspire positive decision-making based purely on the fact that somebody else is doing so. Such role models embody the impulse to deny or create silence around young people's own desires rather than engage with them. Organisations committed to collective strategies instead create spaces for dialogue and conversation.*

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## STRATEGIES

Not every organisation has an existing theory of change; however, by probing them with specific questions, we can understand the different strategies they take to reach their desired outcomes. These range from creating awareness about the harmful implications of early and child marriage to facilitating better implementation of the 2006 Prohibition of Child Marriage Act. While these are direct strategies, many organisations also use indirect routes, such as helping adolescents voice alternative life aspirations or creating safe spaces that young people can access to resist forced marriage. Similarly, some strategies work toward their desired goal by creating fear among the community, while others try to create conversations through collectives or provide alternative spaces and life options to young people.

## THE LAW AND OTHER AUTHORITIES

For many organisations, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act enabled their efforts on early and child marriage. Using the law made it easier to talk about the issue, albeit in the limited capacity of informing communities that it is illegal and a punishable offence. According to the act, any individual complicit in conducting a child marriage is liable to punishment. Organisations started using this clause to engage all the various stakeholders involved in conducting a wedding ceremony, holding them accountable for checking the ages of the bride and groom. This included wedding caterers, tent rental companies, and, most importantly, religious leaders. Because of the reverence of religious leaders by communities, their denial to perform a wedding for an underage couple, or

their claiming that it would be inauspicious, could actually prevent the marriage. Thus, making religious leaders fear the consequences of sanctifying underage marriage increased support against early and child marriage.

Simultaneously, these organisations also mobilised the police and other administrative authorities. They brought the police on their side when intervening at a marriage ceremony of an underage person and made the phone numbers of local authorities available, through wall graffiti and pamphlets, so that anyone from within the community who possessed knowledge of an underage marriage could call on the state for support. They also held the state accountable for delivering such support. In many states, child helplines run by the state or NGOs are helpful avenues for young people when in distress.

However, both organisations and the state rarely wish to file a case under this act. The act is used more for invoking fear and threat than to actually implicate families. Most often authorities will just “counsel” families against underage marriage and let them go. Because members of the police and the bureaucracy are also parts of the community, they are generally very sympathetic of the parents conducting such a marriage. In various parts of the country, we spoke to members of the local administration who said that in the light of young people's access to the internet and mobile phones, and because of growing sexual violence, parents have little choice but to take these drastic measures.

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The number of marriages prevented or intervened in becomes the measure of success for such organisations. However, they may cause more harm than good to the families and individuals they hope to help. Within close-knit rural communities, a police intervention or raid at a wedding is a matter of stigma and shame. Such interventions can have deep emotional trauma on the families, as well as injure their social reputation and standing. Even though it is tempting to think that such a punishment is justified, it is often because of much more dire conditions that families may have felt compelled to take such steps, and, far from empowering either the bride or the groom, these incidents further disempower

them. To avoid such interventions, families conduct underage marriages in another village or in the dead of the night in a field, which renders the young people in question even more invisible and marginal.

## CAMPAIGNS

Above and beyond creating awareness about the law, many organisations also address the harmful impacts of child marriage through campaigns. Using innovative means like art, comics, short films, theatre or even addressing social gatherings, these organisations hope to appeal, either rationally or emotionally, to parents and the larger society. The content of these campaigns includes the law, but focuses on the development discourse of early pregnancy and dropping out of school. Most of the innovation of this strategy is at the level of how to communicate with a wider audience, while what is being said remains constant across organisations, regions and states. That said, many organisations rely on an even simpler campaign strategy: marches through the village, calling out slogans as a way of creating awareness.

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These organisations are usually interested in behavioural change and measure success not by individual relationships, but by the fall in the average number of recorded child marriages in their region. Such campaigns don't have the negative fallout of the previous strategy, but their positive impacts are also fleeting and unsustainable at best. To think that information alone will suffice in fighting a deep-rooted structural issue in its various complexities is an optimistic assumption. That said, because most of these strategies are adopted by organisations that articulate their problem as marriage before the legal age, they find that these strategies are sufficient to meet their goal. Yet attribution of a rising age at marriage to these campaigns is difficult to do because, as we have demonstrated, there are various factors that can affect age at marriage.

## COLLECTIVES AND FORUMS

Meaningful attitudinal change and challenges to social norms are only possible with collectives. Organisations working on early and child marriage, or more broadly on empowerment, rely strongly on the formation of collectives and forums to create spaces of critical dialogue and action. The space of women's collectives, for example, is used to build an understanding of gender and patriarchy, and build women's capacities to engage with a skewed power equation within households and in wider society. Through the collective, these women are able to create support systems for themselves within the community. These spaces are also used to build the capacity to engage with the state machinery to ask for rights and entitlements, as well as for building skills like literacy and numeracy, or, more recently, information technology, all in the direction of their overall empowerment.

For young girls, these groups often include building skills via activities, like sports, art, craft, dance and theatre. Through these spaces, girls are able to speak more freely about the problems that plague them and are given assistance, guidance and counselling on how to deal with them. Because they build strong bonds with one another, they are able to stand up as a group against issues within the community that are common problems. In Jharkhand, where many organisations work with collectives of adolescent girls to empower them using football, we heard cases of collectively resisting marriage or standing up against sexual harassment. In one such case, a girl's parents were trying to force her into marriage, and she mobilized her collective to go as a group to the police station to lodge a formal complaint against her parents. The NGO itself intervened to prevent this, as it would have had dire consequences on the girl's family. In doing so, they negotiated on her behalf with the family, who agreed not to marry her off until she was 18. For such organisations, relaying information about the law is a part of a strategy to empower, rather than to create fear.

*In a collective, girls are able to speak more freely about the problems that plague them and are given assistance, guidance and counselling on how to deal with them. Because they build strong bonds with one another, they are able to stand up as a group against issues within the community.*

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While collectives and forums can sound ideal, and offer a much more comprehensive strategy, there are various pitfalls. If the discourse of the collective is limited to age at marriage and does not look at marriage in a broader sense, the creation of the space itself will not lead to empowerment. This is most visible in the case of sexuality. Collectives are often apprehensive to speak about it, and, lacking the capacities to facilitate such a conversation, they leave it in silence. Without speaking about sexuality, collectives can neither empower young people nor adult women to engage with early and child marriage. Furthermore, power dynamics within collectives may also be problematic, especially if the powerful voices of a few limit the voice of the whole.

## ALTERNATIVE LIFE OPTIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

The centrality of marriage in the lives of young people means that after a certain age, especially for girls, marriage becomes their only aspiration. Even those girls who have aspirations beyond marriage are often reduced to being wives and mothers. Throughout our interactions with young people, especially young married girls, we heard pain-filled stories of their aspirations being cut short due to marriage. Some of these girls had been courageous enough to return to schooling or university after their marriage while others, even if they were studying, had convinced themselves to temper their aspirations for the future. A woman of 20 in Jharkhand, who wished very much to be a social worker and thus continue her education, told us tearfully that between household responsibilities and taking care of her child, she was unable to focus on studying and would probably have to drop out of university.

Within this context, a key strategy used by many organisations is to create a space for alternative life options and aspirations for young people. They may achieve this either by enrolling girls in school and convincing parents to send their girls to school to delay marriage or by creating facilities for alternative learning and employment, where girls can learn livelihood skills and hope to be financially independent. These strategies can often be very hard to implement because the availability of schools or job opportunities is beyond the scope of one NGO. They are vulnerable to the state and market forces, and, chances are, these larger structures will fail to provide these organisations and girls with the opportunities they need to avoid marriage.

For this strategy to have a meaningful impact, its method of implementation is of crucial importance. As mentioned earlier, a fieldworker told us that “girls bend their heads and go to school and bend their heads and

return home”—which is to say that the school, itself, is a disempowering space for girls, such that adding a few more years of schooling may not help them in any way. Especially when school curriculums reinforce mainstream gender norms and ideas, sending girls to school to delay marriage may add no positive contribution to young people. If done with the right approach, an alternative space that teaches livelihood skills can also be a radical space for critical dialogue and capacity building about engaging with social life meaningfully. One organisation that teaches its girls stitching and knitting, which are legitimately accepted as feminine professions and skills in mainstream society, uses the space of the class to also facilitate critical dialogue around gender, patriarchy and their rights as girls. The livelihood component makes it simpler for girls to access that space without objection, and such a space is then used for empowerment.

## ALTERNATIVE INSTITUTIONAL SPACES

In India, the family is the primary institutional space that provides for one's emotional and material needs. When the family is a source of oppression or force, young girls (and boys) have very few alternative institutional spaces that they can access. Several organisations highlight this as an important gap in the existing structures of the state, one that keeps young girls entrenched in a disempowering situation. However it is beyond the scope of individual organisations to create or sustain an institutional space of this magnitude, and, we believe, it is the responsibility of the state to create such a space.

*When the family is a source of oppression or force, young girls (and boys) have very few alternative spaces that they can access. Many organisations aspire to create an alternative institutional space, which they see as the most effective strategy to not only prevent underage marriage but also to empower young girls to find and live their aspirations.*

The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) are residential schools set up by the government to educate girls from impoverished or marginalized backgrounds. Despite being fraught with problems, and in some parts of the country simply not available, these are the only institutional spaces that exist if young girls from rural communities wish to live away from their families (and from pressure to marry) and pursue their education. In some states, where KGBVs are run by Mahila Samakhya,

a quasi-governmental body working on women's rights, these spaces transgress their minimum purpose as residential schools and have become alternative support systems among young girls.

Some organisations have successfully created safe homes or safe spaces for young girls, so that they are able to extract girls away from their marginalisation and provide them a constructive environment. The energy within these homes is incredible and inspiring. With the right kind of activities and engagement, even girls who have suffered terrible abuse in the past are able to build strong bonds with one another and live like a family. However, these safe spaces are often single homes that struggle for funds and toe the boundary of what is and is not institutionally acceptable. Yet the only other options are institutional spaces like convents, which many young girls see as “prisons,” preferring to stay in their natal homes even with the attendant pressures for marriage.

Despite the inherent difficulties, many organisations aspire to create an alternative institutional space; given the right kind of resources, they see it as the most effective strategy to not only prevent underage marriage but also to empower young girls to find and live their aspirations.

## THEMATIC AREAS

Below, we analyse the interventions we observed, grouped according to their thematic emphasis.

### EDUCATION

Education is seen, both in the literature as well as in the field, as being an effective means of preventing early and child marriage: education is typically perceived as a tool that provides girls with the power to negotiate and raise the age at which they get married. One of the limits of education-based interventions, as we've seen, is that they tend to reinforce the “good-girl” and “good-boy” norms. This limit came up in various conversations, both with staff members and adolescents. The need to conform to patriarchal gender norms through the education system can make it a way of controlling behaviour, rather than a space for awareness and empowerment.

From the variety of interventions we observed, two are particularly interesting. An organisation in Andhra Pradesh has found residential bridge courses to be an effective strategy: the adolescents can live in a group home while they study, and thus are better able to negotiate pressure from their families to get married. An organisation in Maharashtra created a curriculum

for sexuality education that they replicated in schools across the district for students between the ages of 12 and 16. The results were mixed—teachers were generally squeamish and preferred to stand outside the classroom while the NGO members led discussions—but students were able to ask a variety of questions about their bodies, and this helped in dispelling myths and biases.

### SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS (SRHR)

Work on SRHR has dominated the current interventions on early and child marriage. However, while observing these interventions it became clear that a lot of the information relayed to the staff members and ultimately to the community are half-truths and not based on facts. Staff members at one organisation, when asked why they thought girls should get married after 18, said that once a girl turns 18 her body and mind are “ready,” an idea often mentioned, but for which they had no actual explanation. Such ideas reflect the dominance of the prevalent narrative and the inadequacy of alternate information. Furthermore, there is little recognition of the fact that even if NGOs provide (accurate) health information, that doesn't mean adolescents have the power to negotiate crucial decisions. As important, very few NGOs talk about the more difficult SRHR issues: bodily integrity, access to contraception, sex and sexual choices, and the possibility of safe sex before marriage.

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A few organisations that had initiated conversations on sexuality claimed that they faced a backlash from the community and had to abandon them. However, during our fieldwork we spoke to adolescent girls and boys and found that after a certain level of comfort is established they are willing to talk about sexuality and, to a certain extent, about their personal desires. Therefore, there is a need for some introspection among staff members about their own inhibitions in talking about sexuality.

Some of these NGOs, as mentioned earlier, are using the medium of football to interact with adolescent girls. Such interventions have succeeded in building confidence and leadership qualities in the girls. Football provides a

venue to discuss other pertinent issues, from menstrual cycles to bodily hygiene. But there remains a gap as far as discussions on sexuality are concerned.

Most of the time, discussions about SRHR revolve around the negative consequences of marrying early. Information on contraception is typically shared with married individuals but not with unmarried ones. The assumption is that adolescents can't (or don't) indulge in premarital sex, which is both a fallacy and ignores the risk adolescents face by having unprotected sex, including exposure to sexually transmitted diseases. An exception to this lack of information is the organisation based out of Mumbai that works with daughters of sex workers and runs a kind of safe home for them. The organisation has progressive and healthy conversations around sexual desire and sexual health, and the girls were more at ease talking with us about such topics compared to the girls we spoke with at other organisations. Not surprisingly, the attitudes of the staff members were also noticeably different, which could be a reason for the comfort and confidence exuded by the girls.

## LIVELIHOOD

Several studies and interventions have asserted that if girls have a viable and secure means to earn a living, parents tend to delay their marriage. Indeed, during our field visits a common worry of parents was, "What will she do if she's not married?" Idleness, some parents fear, might drive a girl to indulge in things that aren't approved. Hence, increasing the ability to earn an income seems like an obvious intervention, and many organisations shared that they try to delay marriage by engaging girls in vocational training. However, our experience in the field has revealed that organisations often provide skill training that doesn't convert into actual income. We did not find any instances where mere access to vocational training successfully delayed the age of marriage for girls.

*We did not find any instances where mere access to vocational training successfully delayed the age of marriage for girls, because they didn't get any career counselling or opportunities to apply these skills.*

In talking to various community members, we learned that just having access to these trainings doesn't give much negotiating power to girls at home. The main reason behind this, we found, was the lack of real uses

for these skills. Girls told us that they didn't know what to do with the skills they had received as part of the intervention because they didn't get any career counselling or opportunities to apply these skills. Skill training can indeed be an effective strategy in empowering girls to negotiate their marriages with family, but mere training is not effective unless it leads to actual opportunities to generate income.

## VIOLENCE

Though almost all organisations agreed that a lower age at marriage exacerbates violence against women after marriage, we found no organisation actually working or addressing the issue of violence—whether physical, mental, emotional or sexual—in the field. These organisations still use early pregnancy and maternal health as arguments against early and child marriage instead of talking about increased violence, lack of sexual agency or the burdens of adulthood.

Some of the organisations we came to know started their work on early and child marriage through their existing work on domestic violence after observing the extreme vulnerability of young brides. However, even these organisations now engage with issues of violence only in a limited sense—occasional reporting or supporting women in a moment of crisis—while focusing more on strategies for delaying or stopping marriage. This is ironic in many ways, as even women's organisations that began their work by focusing on violence are not focusing on violence in their early and child marriage work.

The lack of engagement with issues of violence is also an example of how, because of the overwhelming focus of most organisations on delaying marriage, once a girl does get married at a young age she tends to be forgotten. There is a need for more organisations to make the connection between early and child marriage and domestic violence, not only to build arguments around it, but also to provide support for those young brides who do experience violence.

## MEDIA

In Jharkhand, we observed an organisation that works to educate the local media about their social responsibilities. They also have a media van where they show films and distribute material on child marriage in the community. This organisation utilises Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed pedagogy while performing plays on the issue of child marriage in different villages. Theirs is an interactive method and transforms the spectators into active participants in the play. However, certain parts of

the play we saw focused on the protagonist as merely a victim and presented the issues in a symptomatic manner.

Other organisations that use media and information technology creatively are those that run child lines, or phone helplines for children in distress. These organisations advertise these helplines through billboards and through instant messaging, fliers, pamphlets and wall paintings. We heard mixed responses about the effectiveness of this service. In some states, like Andhra Pradesh, many boys and girls seeking help when they faced pressure used this service. In other states, like Bihar, organisations claimed it was not particularly successful.

Apart from child lines, organisations are also using mobile phones to reach out to communities at large. One organisation recruited a famous Hindi movie actor as part of its campaign against early and child marriage; dialling the organisation's phone number prompts a pre-recorded message in the actor's voice, talking about the ill effects and illegality of early and child marriage. This outreach effort is clever, but its efficacy is unclear, especially in rural areas where people may not even recognize the voice on the phone.

## BOYS AND MEN

Interventions become very ineffective if adequate work is not being done with men and adolescent boys. We did find a few organisations that had formed groups with adolescent boys, but not all organisations realize the need to work with boys and men. These groups discuss the ill effects of child marriage in terms of its impact on education and health. However, they do not yet have conversations around the more complex questions of masculinity, violence and sexuality, and there is only limited conversation about safe sex with unmarried adolescent boys.

Only two organisations we observed worked actively with men. They have formed groups with farmers, and they engage them on agricultural issues but also discuss social issues, including child marriage. The organisations have found that these older men can be convinced of the ill effects of early and child marriage if they are engaged for a substantial period of time. Though the discussion of social issues is valuable, these efforts tend to reinforce the "good man" norm instead of confronting structural issues like patriarchy.

## TRAFFICKING

The links between trafficking and early and child marriage are complex, as we have seen, and require a nuanced

understanding of the relationship between cause and effect. We found an overall ambiguity on the issue of trafficking among community members and organisations alike. Every organisation had a unique definition of what does and does not qualify as a trafficking case. Through our research, we found a low incidence of overlap between cases of early marriage and trafficking. While early and child marriage may sometimes be used as a modus operandi for traffickers, the two issues are fundamentally different and need to be understood and attended to as such.

During our field visits, it became clear that many cases of eloping are dumped under the trafficking category when parents don't approve of their child's partner. On the flip side, marriages occur between adolescent girls and older men, and thus are technically trafficking cases, but never get reported due to parental consent and the social sanction that these marriages have from the community.

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Organisations told us of parents who take money from the traffickers and willingly sell their daughters into marriage. In a few such instances, parents (especially mothers) don't understand the full consequences of such marriages, though these are far less than those where parents (especially fathers) know full well that they are trafficking their daughters.

It is very difficult for NGOs to engage with parents and the larger community and convince them of the consequences of early and child marriage and trafficking. Most of the families who marry their younger girls are extremely poor, and girls who are married as part of a trafficking racket provide relief from dowry, as well as provide some monetary compensation to poverty-stricken families.

The aspiration toward an urban life and to escape deprivation and poverty is a powerful lure. But most NGOs do not recognize these aspirations and see girls only as victims of trafficking. Many organisations rescue girls from trafficking and keep them in shelter homes, train them in skills or provide courses. These same organisations, however, also acknowledged to us that often girls don't stick to their rescued life and actually go back to traffickers.

These organisations see this willing return to the trafficker as a setback. We find this an example of the gap in understanding among NGOs about the aspirations of girls and boys. These are some of the complexities that we came to understand during our work in the field, and we feel strongly that there is much more to this complexity than what we uncovered. Thus there is need for separate study to understand the links between early and child marriage and trafficking. Poverty, patriarchal norms and individual aspirations all are so intrinsically linked to early and child marriage that deeper understanding and analysis are necessary to be able to clearly articulate how they each affect and are affected by the others.

## CONCLUSION

Having analysed the different types of organisations working directly or indirectly on early and child marriage, there are some broad gaps that we have found. This is not to say that individual organisations have not tried to fulfil these, but from the perspective of creating conversation around possibilities for the future, we believe that further work is necessary. Once again, we have tried to articulate these gaps following the steps of the theory of change.

### GAPS IN ARTICULATION

Only some organisations acknowledge issues of right to choice and consent within marriage decisions, and very few actually view marriage critically as a social institution that reproduces inequalities.

### GAPS IN LONG-TERM GOALS

There is a dearth of organisations that see young people's empowerment, and their ability to exercise choice and voice consent, as their final goal, and even fewer who wish for collective social change around ideas of marriage.

### GAPS IN APPROACHES

Too many organisations work from a model of behavioural change, based on fear of the law and awareness of the negative impacts of early and child marriage; very few engage with attitudinal change. Similarly, an empowerment approach that is adolescent-centric is also lacking in the field, specifically among those organisations that articulate themselves as working on child marriage. The result is that most approaches are focused more on preventing child marriage than on empowerment.

## GAPS IN STRATEGIES

Organisations limit their strategies to individual cases without engaging in larger collective processes. Further, strategies don't focus on creating access to alternative life options that can be empowering, nor do they focus on creating alternative spaces that can be accessed by young people. Those few that articulate the desire to use this strategy face the issue of not enough support and funding toward such outcomes. Because of this, there is a lack of institutional spaces that provide adolescents alternatives to marriage or help them to resist early and child marriage. Strategies that work through awareness campaigns ignore the deep-rooted norms and mindsets around marriage and ignore that it is often a matter that communities feel strongly about, such that rational arguments cannot bring about the desired change.

## GAPS IN THEMES

There is close to no work at the intersection of boys, masculinity, and early and child marriage. Work on sexual and reproductive health often takes a limiting and negative approach to sexuality and doesn't create conversations around young people's desires. Education initiatives are often used instrumentally, rather than with any focus on creating alternative education spaces (or engaging with existing ones) to make a more empowering space for young people. Livelihood organisations are able to provide tangible skills but fail to help adolescents to translate these into employability and financial independence, and basic career counselling is missing. While organisations that use art or sport do exist and are quite successful in reaching their desired goals, there are too few organisations that work on these innovative thematic areas, which hold potential for social change.

## ANALYSIS

In our overall analysis of organisations in the field, we have found certain patterns emerging through the diversity that exists at every level. Here we offer two categories of organisations that exist at different spots along the spectrum, to highlight their differences. In our view, the second category of organisation is the most effective when addressing the issue of early and child marriage and empowering young people; however, this does not mean we recommend a "one-size-fits-all" approach. The kind of organisation we recommend is one that is empowered enough to come up with its own unique solutions to problems as they are understood within their local contexts in order to come to the best possible outcome for those it works with.

No organisation can successfully implement every strategy, work on every thematic area, or through every approach address every problem. Every organisation is compelled to choose its own priorities and make decisions based on a myriad of factors. The current analysis of the gaps in intervention is, therefore, not a critique of any one organisation, but an overview of those elements currently lacking in the field. Below is an illustration of the two different types of organisations.

*The kind of organisation we recommend is one that is empowered enough to come up with its own unique solutions to problems as they are understood within their local contexts in order to come to the best possible outcome for those it works with.*

#### **PATTERN 1: FOCUSED ON AGE AT MARRIAGE**



This first type of organisation articulates its problem within the framework of age at marriage. At this level, the problem is not informed by the complex realities in the field, but instead by the official discourse of the state and the development sector. These organisations hope to achieve child marriage-free zones and pay a lot of attention to measuring the number of child marriages

prevented or the decline in the total percentage of child marriage within the region following their interventions. Toward this end, their approach is one that instrumentally brings down the age of marriage, even if that means enrolling girls in mainstream schools until they turn 18, regardless of the quality of education provided.

Because these organisations focus on the development discourse, their approach toward the issue is not informed by the root causes or the specific local contexts within which they work. Because of the emphasis on numbers, these organisations focus on behavioural change rather than attitudinal change and use individual role models to motivate others to follow suit. These organisations primarily use law in different capacities as a way of enforcing age of marriage or use campaigns to create awareness of the law and commonly articulated impacts of early and child marriage.

While these organisations do create some positive impact, by intervening in marriages or using law enforcement to stop child marriage they may also alienate the communities within which they work, without really empowering the boys and girls they were keen on protecting from marriage. Because their discourse is not rooted in local realities, they view all marriages of girls younger than 18 as negative and do not account for those where young people themselves desire to be married and where their lives actually stand to improve following the marriage (for example, if the couple wishes to move away from the village to pursue further education or employment). A lack of focus on empowering young people while enforcing certain policies or rules on them, such as attending school, may further disempower young people by silencing them further. Focusing on behavioural change without addressing the root causes means that marriages taking place after a girl turns 18 may not be any more egalitarian than those involving a girl younger than 18, and the focus on prevention neglects any impact on women who are already in structurally unequal and oppressive marriages, independent of their age.

#### **PATTERN 2: A FOCUS ON EMPOWERMENT**

The second pattern has room for a lot more diversity. Some of the organisations find early and child marriage problematic, in as much as it violates fundamental human rights of young people, and aspire toward a vision where all young people are able to access all these rights. Others still have a critical articulation of marriage and view it within its context of social structures. With this as a starting point, they aim to empower young people to exercise their agency in making important life decisions. They approach the issue from an adolescent-centric

perspective, understanding that young people need different rights than those of children, and they try to work with groups to create a space for dialogue about these rights, rather than a role model-based approach showcasing those who were able to access more rights. However, their discourse is still strongly influenced by the rights-based articulation of the international development sector, including articulations of a right to leisure, a right to freedom, etc. While this may be desirable in the long run, because these rights are not informed by the real aspirations of young people, based on their own lived realities, they stay limited at the level of theory. While those who are a part of the intervention may be fully aware of their rights, they may not know how to negotiate ways to access them. In many senses, these organisations are also informed by a symptomatic understanding of early and child marriage, as they do not address the underlying structural inequalities. The structures that cause early and child marriage are the same ones that get in the way of young people accessing their rights (regardless of their marital status). Even though these organisations may hope that young people are able to break these structures, their own interventions don't aid that task.



Other organisations understand that empowerment can only be achieved when young people understand the social structures that disempower them, which can be further developed into collective processes of dialogues

and struggle. They approach the issue from an adolescent-centric perspective and create space for adolescents to voice their own opinions, beliefs and desires. They also understand that not all adolescent desires should be fulfilled, but they engage with such desires by counselling young people, rather than by using force or authority.

Organisations that follow the second pattern use campaigns and work in groups to create awareness and conversations about rights. They also create access to alternative life options and aspirations by speaking about issues of financial independence, bodily integrity, etc. To achieve these, they work on various thematic areas, although work in the areas of livelihood, sexual and reproductive health or education is often used instrumentally. This means that while such an organisation may give young people livelihood skills, or access to education or an awareness of their sexual and reproductive health, these skills will not include practical help on how to use this information toward financial independence or bodily integrity.

A common thread of strategies in many of these organisations is to create safe spaces for young girls. Their nature varies dramatically, from government residential schools that are run by a quasi-governmental women's group to a safe home run by activists. The scale of such projects, the extent to which they can challenge existing social structures and the issues that they can speak about vary according to factors like institutional affiliation, funding and management. Regardless of these factors, most of these organisations take a political stance against certain issues of patriarchy, class, caste and religious divides in society, and if they fail to focus on specific articulations, most often sexuality, it is because of a lack of capacities, rather than a desire to avoid uncomfortable issues.

These organisations use innovative strategies, including art therapy, psychotherapy and sports, along with taking an empowering approach to existing strategies around earning an income, education, sexuality, etc. Through all this, they hope to create alternative life options and aspirations for young people. Within the residential spaces, the role of the collective is clear, as this space becomes a strong source of emotional and affective support from which girls find the strength to engage with complex familial relationships.



## *Monitoring and Evaluation*

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Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is an important process for all development interventions to engage in. If used correctly, it can create a culture of learning within organisations that makes them more engaged with the realities they work in. Here we will draw upon the theory of change, as we've used throughout the report in order to examine existing challenges to M&E as it relates to early and child marriage. Drawing on the experience of the research team, through this section we wish to highlight its potential merits. Currently, none of the organisations we interviewed during the landscape analysis use theory of change for M&E; but since it is an exercise in critically understanding the nature of interventions in early and child marriage, using its framework illustrates the arguments that we are making in this section. After discussing the role of M&E, we conclude with recommendations for an approach to M&E that can be transformative for all groups involved.

## ARTICULATION OF THE PROBLEM OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Before we proceed further, we should state the obvious: most NGOs do not look forward to M&E, and see the process as difficult, tedious and only for the benefit of donors. As one person we interviewed said, "It hurts like a stick." M&E can, and often does, have a negative impact on interventions. Because the process is often donor driven, as a way to create accountability for how funds are used, it pressures organisations to display their work as a series of success stories and to downplay the challenges they face.

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The increasing pressure to meet quantitative indicators or other targets (like reducing percentages of early and child marriages or creating child marriage-free zones) can encourage an organisation to choose strategies that narrow, rather than enlarge, dialogue about the possibilities of interventions in the field. The pressure on targets undermines the challenges faced by organisations in the perpetually difficult task of facilitating social change. When we encourage discussions only about successes, we fail to create a space for sharing challenges

and solving ongoing problems. Finally, by emphasizing a flat, simplistic understanding of the problems involved (in order to make them easier to monitor), typical M&E can lead to solutions that offer Band-Aids but fail to address the multiplicity of issues involved. This kind of M&E can detract from, rather than strengthen, the work of an organisation.

Too often at present, M&E for early and child marriage interventions is not utilised as a means to aid the empowerment of young people. Based on our work in the field, we posit that the current scope of M&E is limited, in part because it does not draw upon an organisation's theory of change; thus, it is not evaluating how an organisation understands the problem and whether its goals, strategies, and approach are informed by root causes. As we have seen, every stage of an organisation's work—its long-term goals and its approaches and strategies to get there—flow from the way that the organisation articulates the problem. Yet even the most progressive approaches to M&E, such as outcomes mapping, begin only from the "long-term goals" or "vision" or "mission" of the organisation, without understanding the problem that this vision aims to solve.

The impact an organisation seeks to make, and the strategies it takes to achieve long-term goals, are the result of the organisation's articulation of the problem. That articulation, in turn, can even reinforce and strengthen the status quo. In the case of early and child marriage, as we have seen, interventions that celebrate marriage at 18, while failing to see the inherent issues of choice, consent and quality of marriage, reproduce the larger problems of the institution itself. Furthermore, the consideration of goals or vision or mission is usually done in an uncritical, disengaged manner, such that these are seen as a "given," while the focus is shifted to the strategies that flow from them.

M&E that is thus restricted by the existing theory of change of the organisation is problematic. For example, if the organisation thinks only age is the problem, and its goals are to reduce age at marriage through keeping girls in school and using the law, M&E will mirror that focus. M&E won't consider, for example, whether the interventions are empowering young people, since that's not part of its understanding of the problem or vision to begin with. So when M&E limits itself to the theory of change of that organisation, it will assess only whether the organisation has been able to reduce age at marriage. At best, M&E might be able to question whether it is being able to keep girls in school or use the law. This cycle perpetuates itself, as organisations limit themselves to typical guidelines of M&E, while M&E does the same

in return. The end result, too often, is a process that reinforces the status quo of what is and isn't included within the ambit of interventions and does not encourage questions related to young people's empowerment.

One of the reasons for this disengagement is linked to a fear of being prescriptive on the part of external agencies and consultants. M&E mechanisms that seek to be participatory, including feminist evaluation, for example, often shy away from broadening the framework beyond what the organisation is articulating. While the fear of being prescriptive is genuine and important, an absence of critical engagement perpetrates the cycle highlighted above. This is particularly true for early and child marriage, where cultural norms are already so strong; this normativity, unintentionally aided by the politics of funding, can create a cycle that restricts the discourse and scope of work for the entire issue. For example, the current scope of M&E excludes the need for organisations to look within at their own internal capacities to critically engage with biases and norms. The scope also excludes external agencies such as resource groups, researchers and funders. This exclusion results in a lack of spaces for inter-agency dialogue about one another's assumptions, biases and norms that inform each of the theories of change, even when agencies are open to learning from one another.

## LONG-TERM GOALS FOR M&E

If used correctly, M&E can help organisations reflect upon and learn from their existing efforts, creating an overall culture of learning that makes them more adaptive and responsive to the realities in which they work. The process can also contribute to both action research to identify and understand existing gaps and evidence-based advocacy. Such M&E provides the space and flexibility that can help interventions become empowering and adolescent-centric. To aid work on early and child marriage, the scope and objectives of M&E need to be broadened.

With the above-mentioned problems in mind, we would like to infuse monitoring and evaluation with a more useful set of objectives. We believe that M&E should:

- Strengthen approaches so that they are more empowering and adolescent-centric
- Strengthen the design, planning, implementation and review processes
- Identify gaps and challenges, rather than merely showcase positive achievements
- Enable processes of self-reflection as part of the collective journey of the organisation

## APPROACHES TO M&E

Embracing these objectives gives us the capacity to expand the scope of monitoring and evaluation in order to include every stage of the theory of change. A transformative approach to M&E can encourage critical reflection on the broader visions of all organisations and agencies working on early and child marriage. That reflection should include attitudes, knowledge and skills, rather than limit itself to behaviour, especially since early and child marriage interventions tend to be overly focused on behavioural change. In this respect, concurrent changes in the attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviour of staff members, and the organisation itself, should also be assessed: we need to look within and not only outwards at other stakeholders.

*We believe external facilitation can be valuable, without being prescriptive. In the context of early and child marriage, where there is such a limited recognition of root causes and impacts—coupled with a tremendous pressure on targets—it might be valuable for organisations to plan their work, including their own M&E, with external support.*

Central to a transformative M&E is a clear articulation of the theory of change. This would include articulating the understanding of the problem, the desired changes, the key elements of how the problem will be approached and the core thematic areas that will be addressed. While for some organisations the process of designing M&E is internal, for others it is conducted by an external agency, and for others, still, it is a process primarily located within the organisation, but externally facilitated. We believe external facilitation can be valuable, without being prescriptive. In the context of early and child marriage, where there is such a limited recognition of root causes and impacts—coupled with a tremendous pressure on targets—it might be valuable for organisations to plan their work, including their own M&E, with external support. This is, of course, dependent on the approach of the external facilitators and whether they have a clear articulation of their own theory of change.

## STRATEGIES OF M&E

We argue that organisations should be evaluated on every aspect of the theory of change: articulation of the problem, long-term goals, approaches and strategies.

Simultaneously, a theory of change cannot be a static document and must respond to the learning and reflection that takes place in the field. If an organisation's own discourse evolves over time, that itself is a signal of its meaningful engagement with the issue in the field.

As part of our effort to make M&E more meaningful, we would like to introduce an additional strategy: the Four A's, which stand for Access, Availability, Aspiration and Agency. Various agencies, including American Jewish World Service, use these four axes to provide a holistic frame across which the work of diverse organisations can be evaluated.

No matter what the approach, strategy and thematic area of an organisation, the Four A's can help that organisation reflect on whether current work is having a holistic impact on its target groups, and on what is required for future work. While it is impossible for all organisations to focus on all of the four axes, these four offer a means to identify the gaps in an organisation's own work and seek assistance or collaboration with other organisations toward a holistic impact. For organisations that work toward creating access to education, for example, physical infrastructure and social norms are very limiting. Within this context, it is too much to also expect them to engage with the curriculum and quality of education within these spaces. This is true for every root cause of early and child marriage and their related thematic areas. As no organisation can solve a complex issue like early and child marriage by itself, the Four A's offers a strategy for reflection and collaboration. The scope of inquiry of M&E should include indicators like these to assess whether the organisation's understanding is holistic and in depth; only then will the organisation be able to effectively implement its strategy, and, when necessary, to identify other actors and facilitate links with other organisations in order to ensure that young people have the access and the support that they need.

## NIRANTAR'S APPROACH—AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

As discussed earlier, the research and analysis of this report flowed from Nirantar's articulation of its own theory of change. Although our research was not intended as a monitoring and evaluation exercise, it did involve an external agency—Nirantar—that sought to understand the interventions of the chosen organisations. Here we use Nirantar's theory of change—which was both a source for this research, and further refined over the course of the research.

Nirantar sought a critical understanding of the participating organisations; toward that end, we strived for a transformative approach that aimed to strengthen their ongoing work in the realm of early and child marriage in ways that further the empowerment and rights of young people. We share below some of the key elements of that transformative approach, as well as the rationale behind them.

### DUAL APPROACH

As discussed, Nirantar began this project by developing a theory of change. When we went into the field, we facilitated a process whereby each organisation articulated its own theory of change. This dual approach was important because, on the one hand, it is critical to measure progress based on the goals set out by the intervention itself, but on the other hand, it is also important not to be limited by it. If M&E is to strengthen interventions, it must be a dynamic process whereby the theory of change of each party, the implementing organisation and the M&E agency or consultant, is open to critical engagement with the other.

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We wanted the terms of engagement between researcher and researched to be transparent. We wanted to articulate where we were coming from and where the organisations were located. Every aspect of assessment is rooted in particular understandings, assumptions and value systems, but these are most often taken for granted or only referred to superficially. The theory of change helped us to articulate where we were located in the assessment process in clear terms. How did we understand the problem of early and child marriage? And based on that articulation, what did we think the long-term goals, approaches, strategies and themes should be? This became the lens through which we asked, listened and observed in the field, as well as how we conducted the secondary literature review.

Our commitment to transparency does not mean that we shared our theory of change with the implementing agency at the start of the M&E. Only much later, in the analysis, in the report as well as in the sharing of the

findings back with organisations working in the field, have we been transparent about our own work. The result was a dynamic process; in particular, what we learned from the field made us revisit our theory of change and revise it.

### **TRANSFORMING, NOT REINFORCING, THE STATUS QUO**

Using a dual approach allowed us to critically assess how an organisation understands the problem of early and child marriage and how it seeks to address it. That approach enabled us to ask probing questions, engage with the organisation and help a process whereby it, as part of M&E, could revisit its articulation of the problem and its vision. To be clear: there is no one right answer, and our understanding and vision was neither perfect nor better than that of the organisations we worked with. Our commitment to young people's empowerment opened up the possibilities for critical engagement and dynamic dialogue. It enabled us to probe the implementing organisation's understanding, vision and work as it relates to early and child marriage, hopefully toward greater empowerment of young people.

### **BEGINNING WITH THE PROBLEM AND NOT THE VISION**

M&E most often begins with the vision of the organisation. We wanted to take one step back and to see how the organisation views the problem. So a critical question for us was: what is the problem with early and child marriage? The answer to this is neither obvious nor homogenous, but that answer influences everything else. What does the organisation want to change? From this follows the "how."

How an organisation articulates the problem of early and child marriage is inevitably related to the organisation's understanding of its root causes and its impact. Thus, articulation of the problem offers a window into the politics of the organisation. If its understanding of the problem is limited to age, that indicated to us that its concern was not so much about young people's empowerment. If it argued that early and child marriage was linked to the denial of opportunities to young people, we knew that it was concerned about young people's rights. If an organisation emphasised the ways marriage is linked to the aggravated impact of norms on young people's lives, we understood that the organisation had an empowerment approach.

A clear link also emerged between what an organisation saw as the problem with early and child marriage and what that organisation sought to change and how. If an organisation thought only age was a problem, and their

goal was to increase age at marriage, the strategy was often limited to keeping the girl in school, or using the law to generate fear, irrespective of the quality of the education received, or whether it was empowering. If the understanding of the problem was that norms had an aggravated impact on young people, then the goal was to address those norms and the strategy was to empower young people to be able to understand and better negotiate those norms. Thus, goals and strategies clearly flow from the manner in which the problem of early and child marriage is understood.

### **TRANSFORMATIVE FOR ALL**

The dual approach was also important because it meant that we did not have to feel uncomfortable with differences in politics between the organisations and ourselves. It was a transparent and dynamic interplay. Our work in the field was relatively brief, and did not include the mandate of monitoring and evaluation, so we did not facilitate a process whereby organisations revisit their theory of change based on our probes and what we learned from the field. That revisiting, however, is what we recommend should be done at some point in this participatory M&E process. Through this report and through presentations at conferences, meetings, trainings and workshops, we are sharing our theory of change, as well as the patterns related to theory of change of the organisations we visited in the field, in the hopes that our experience will encourage other organisations to look anew at their own theory of change.

*This landscape analysis has been transformative for Nirantar. We see the radical potential of working on the issue. This work has also made the members of the research team re-evaluate the larger issue of marriage as an institution.*

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This landscape analysis has been transformative for Nirantar. We decided to undertake the project because it was an issue that brought together gender, sexuality and education, which are key areas of interest. However, during the course of the work it became clear to us how political this issue was and the possibilities it held for intersectional work toward young people's empowerment. We have begun addressing early and child marriage in our courses, trainings and workshops that we offer with NGOs working with young people, and it is emerging as a significant area of the work of the organisation. We see the radical potential of working on the issue, particularly

since the current discourse can reinforce, rather than challenge, the status quo and is highly limited and problematic. This work has also made the members of the research team re-evaluate the larger issue of marriage as an institution. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that this approach has transformed us as an organisation, both in the way that we engaged with the issue of early and child marriage and also in the way that we used theory of change for our dual approach.

For external agencies that both conduct the M&E and also help an organisation develop or strengthen its own theory of change, we would like to suggest the following steps. First, the external agency articulates its own theory of change. Second, the external agency then undertakes a theory of change exercise with the grantees.

Whether the M&E is done internally within the organisation or with an external agency, it should be a dynamic process. It needs to be an ongoing exercise in order to critically, and accurately, understand the work over the length of the intervention.

## CONCLUSION

The approach to M&E that we are proposing entails a clear articulation of theory of change by the implementing agency. M&E most often begins with emphasizing vision or mission or goals, leaving out the critical first step of how the problem is articulated. Moreover, M&E needs to create a critical dialogue with the implementing agency's vision or mission. Without that dialogue, and without engaging with questions of empowerment and rights, an intervention is in danger of reinforcing the status quo.

When M&E involves an external agency or consultant, we recommend that the agency or consultant also articulates its theory of change. Because no M&E is free of values and assumptions, it is important to be cognizant of these and transparent both to themselves and to the work that interventions undertake. With that self-awareness, an external agency is able to probe organisations to articulate and understand their own theory of change, and

thus can engage critically with their vision and mission. Such probing need not be prescriptive, but rather can offer critical engagement to strengthen interventions along the axes of empowerment and rights. An open, dialogic and dynamic approach will also be transformative for the external agency and consultant.

In the context of early and child marriage, our research highlights how the gaps usually flow from the understanding of the problem, which doesn't account for the root causes and impacts, and which tends to focus on symptoms driven by the priorities of development agencies rather than the rights and needs of young people. Work undertaken from this narrow perspective is often informed by, or reinforces, existing social norms and therefore reinforces the status quo. The tremendous pressure exacerbates all of these problems within early and child marriage interventions to show that targets have been fulfilled. A transformative approach to M&E will be able to not only ease this pressure but ensure that M&E strengthens, rather than weakens, the work through a process of critical reflection at every step.

Beyond broadening the scope of M&E to include the understanding of the problem, we also recommend that M&E should focus not only on external stakeholders but also look within, particularly at the knowledge, skills and attitudes of staff members. This is critical in the context of early and child marriage because social norms that are at the heart of this practice also strongly impact staff members and agency leaders. M&E should thus cover the capacity-building of an organisation's members in order to identify existing gaps and to track whether, and how, those gaps in knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours are being addressed. The scope of M&E should also be broadened to include external agencies, such as resource groups engaged in capacity-building, as well as researchers and funders. This is critical because often in early and child marriage it is only the implementing agencies that work at the community level that are being assessed. The role that these other external agencies play in the realm of early and child marriage can be a powerful one and should also be tracked by M&E.

## *Recommendations*

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Based on our study and our theory of change, we make the following recommendations applicable to all agencies that work on early and child marriage:

- » The articulation of the problem of early and child marriage needs to be broadened to include dialogues around gender, sexuality and the centrality of marriage and violence. The ill effects of early and child marriage are rarely articulated in terms of domestic violence, either by the natal family in forcing the marriage or by the marital family in spousal or other forms of violence.
- » Our collective understanding of sexuality needs to move beyond a focus on chastity to recognize the desires of young people and how marriage is seen as a way of fulfilling these. Moreover, there is a need to look at issues of sexuality after marriage, including but not limited to sexual violence, and a broader conversation around the right to say yes and the right to say no. A more open discussion of sexuality is also a way to address shame and other damaging emotions, and enhance access to health and well-being.
- » There is a need to invest in research and knowledge building around issues of gender and masculinity, sexuality and young people's desires and aspirations, including those young people who are already married. There is also a need to look at diversity, especially sexual diversity, to understand how early and child marriage affect individuals with disabilities, individuals that identify as transgender or queer, and others. Similarly, there is a need to build understanding of different cultural practices and language around sexuality and marriage, especially within tribal communities, and cultures where sexual relationships are not rigidly entrenched in marriage, to see if these impact the nature of and age at marriage.
- » A focus on empowerment—based on an analysis of power—is strongly needed to build an understanding of issues of gender, sexuality, patriarchy, marginalization, bodily integrity, entitlements and violation of rights. By doing so, efforts need to be made to help adolescents imagine other possibilities based on their needs and aspirations.
- » Increasing the options available to young people—particularly in a context where the existing environment does not provide many alternatives and young people's own desires are strongly influenced by what mainstream, patriarchal society considers appropriate for young people. It is only when young people themselves have dreams that they wish to pursue beyond getting married, and when they are encouraged to develop these dreams at a young age, that they will also become actors in the process of change.
- » For such empowerment to take place, agencies need to engage with attitudinal change at the individual and collective level. Merely focusing on behavioural change, such as reducing the number of underage marriages, will not lead to empowerment, as is hoped. Interventions must include support for adolescents—given that attitudinal change is not enough and that individual young people cannot be expected to negotiate with parents, especially not on their own.
- » Moreover, processes of empowerment require collective action and engagement. Norms around marriage are deeply entrenched in society, and a collective process of critical engagement with these norms is needed to bring about sustainable social change. Perspective-building on the institution of marriage—this is critical given that marriage is the arena within which staff members are working. They need to understand the institution, including its linkages with patriarchy and maintaining caste and religious identities. This is important because staff members and functionaries, too, have internalized the centrality and inevitability of marriage. If they are to encourage young people to think of other options, and to support young people in choices they make, the institution of marriage has to be an important theme in the capacity-building of staff members. Without this, their expertise on this issue would be incomplete. An important part of addressing issues of gender, sexuality and centrality of marriage is to help staff members deal with their own inhibitions and fears. Standard trainings and capacity-building is not enough, and such spaces need to encourage profound exploration of the biases and limitations that hold back our work.
- » The role of the state in such processes is crucial, as it can invest in human resources and capacity-building that helps state personnel implement laws in a meaningful way, while simultaneously creating alternative institutional spaces which can be accessed instead of marriage. An example of these would be Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, which are state-run residential schools for adolescent girls. There is also a need to strengthen overall laws and policies that relate to secondary education, health and livelihoods, encouraging empowering life-skills

education and having strong measures to deal with sexual harassment in schools and colleges, medical institutions and workplaces.

- » As we have seen, interventions in education today are often merely a means of keeping girls in school for a few more years. In addition, there is also the danger of education reinforcing the construct of the “good girl.” Instead, all parties should support interventions that enable empowering education. That includes engaging with mainstream education, and bringing early marriage in the curriculum from an empowerment perspective, as well as working to address early marriage in teacher trainings, in a holistic manner.
- » There is a need to invest in organisations working on livelihoods as an increased ability to earn income will enhance the decision-making power of adolescents, and will also impact the decision-making process of parents, who often need the additional income that young people might be able to bring in, and who thus might be more willing to delay marriage. Within the broader realm of livelihood, supporting career counselling is particularly important, since young people need more awareness of the different possibilities for earning income, including options that go against gender stereotypes.
- » All agencies working on early and child marriage—whether state, civil society, or funders—need to undergo intensive capacity-building on the root causes, namely gender, sexuality, violence, and the institution of marriage in order to learn new ways of engaging with early and child marriage through empowering approaches and strategies.
- » Capacity-building is meaningless if it is done in isolation and can be enhanced by collective dialogues around the issue across agencies. For organisations, talking to others like them can build a space where conversations around challenges are encouraged in favour of collective problem-solving, empathy and making connections. Similarly, dialogues with funders will enable donors to be more empathetic and cognisant of the complexities on the ground, such that they are able to support grassroots organisations in undertaking empowering work.
- » Toward this end, the role of monitoring and evaluation is crucial. If M&E is transformative, and looks beyond numbers, at process and the ways in which early and child marriage is approached; it can help create a space for honest reflection and learning within organisations that use M&E to better their own work on the issue.



## *Conclusion*

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Early and child marriage is an issue as complex as it is emotional; in order to address the issue effectively, we must see it as a symptom of multiple root causes. These root causes are fundamentally entwined with structural inequalities, such as poverty and deprivation, constrained gender norms within the patriarchal system, a negative attitude toward sexuality and a desire to control young people, especially young women. Decisions around marriage are often full of anxiety, due to marriage's centrality and the rigid norms governing it; any threat to these norms can feel like a threat to society itself. What can seem like a personal decision made by an individual family is, in fact, entangled in a vast web of structural and social considerations. As families wrangle with everything from longevity to financial sustainability, from communal violence to natural disasters, the myriad uncertainties and risks of our fast-changing, globalising economy all influence marriage.

Looking with a nuanced, feminist perspective makes visible other impacts of early and child marriage, beyond the regularly articulated issues of poor maternal and infant health and the inability to access education, to include larger issues of gender and sexuality, mental and physical and sexual health, and livelihoods.

To meaningfully address early and child marriage, we must look at it from the perspective of youth, while ensuring a thorough understanding of their local contexts. Interventions working with collectives of young people, and of women, need to focus on empowerment and need to create spaces for those who are often disempowered to participate in a collective process of social change. Such an approach can cut across thematic areas of intervention and has the potential to transform the nature and content of each particular intervention.

As we build the capacity of organisations working on the issue of early and child marriage, and as we work with young people and women's collectives, there is a simultaneous need to continue to fill the gaps in our knowledge about the various issues relevant to adolescents, particularly masculinity and sexuality. Finally, we must capitalize on the international interest in early and child marriage, as an opportunity to critically examine the many issues embedded in the institution of marriage, as an opportunity to understand young people's desires and needs and as an opportunity to empower these young people to change the world they will soon inherit.

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## Annexure 2: Key Informants

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**Vanita Mukherjee**, *Ford Foundation*  
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## Annexure 3: Organisations Visited

**Vikalp** (Rajasthan)  
**Rajsamand Jan Vikas Sansthan** (Rajasthan)  
**AMIED** (Rajasthan)  
**Nari-o-Shishu Kalyan Kendra** (West Bengal)  
**Jabala** (West Bengal)  
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**Sangram** (Maharashtra)  
**Kranti** (Maharashtra)  
**VAMP** (Maharashtra)

**Breakthrough** (Jharkhand)  
**Srijan Foundation** (Jharkhand)  
**Samadhan** (Jharkhand)  
**Lok Prerna** (Jharkhand)  
**Mahila Samatha Society** (Andhra Pradesh)  
**Shaheen Collective** (Andhra Pradesh)  
**MV Foundation** (Andhra Pradesh)  
**Mahila Samakhya** (Bihar)  
**Jan Jagran Sansthan** (Bihar)  
**Mahila Kalpana Sanstha** (Delhi)

# Annexure 4: Nirantar's Theory of Change

At the start of the research, Nirantar developed its theory of change to use it as a research tool. Because Nirantar is a resource group that does not have direct interventions linked to early and child marriage, we excluded strategies and thematic areas of work from our theory of change. We gauged organisations based on their articulation of the problem, long-term goals and approaches, and then linked them to the strategies they employed and thematic areas that they worked with in order to draw the overall landscape of interventions around the issue.

## ARTICULATION OF THE PROBLEM

- Marriage is perceived as inevitable
- Young people (especially girls) have little control over decisions concerning everything (including marriage) - due to external sources of power and internalization of social norms
- Marriage exacerbates existing patriarchal restrictions (including sexuality) and adds new expectations and norms
- Age exacerbates issues of marriage

## LONG-TERM GOALS

- Young people who can exercise and understand choice and rights, including rights to bodily integrity, and exercise sexual agency
- Young people who can critically understand their lived realities
- Collective changes in mindsets/attitudes/norms among young people, in governance institutions, in legal systems and enforcing institutions, in civil society, and in social and political, education and religious institutions
- Young people can make decisions related to marriage: if, when, how, why, whether to marry, with an understanding of alternatives to marriage, including the role of the state in providing alternative institutional spaces.

## APPROACH

- Adolescent-centric
- Informed by root causes
- Informed by local contexts
- Focused on empowerment and rights
- Be critical. Examine the patriarchy, gender, and institution of marriage.
- Acknowledge/create support structures, both at state, civil society and community level for adolescents.











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