



# WORKING WITH YOUNG BRIDES IN RAJASTHAN: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

## ABOUT US

**Vikalp** is a nonprofit organization that aims to end early and child marriage in Rajasthan by supporting and empowering young people; educating parents, community members and other key decision makers; and advocating for policy change. Vikalp has stopped more than 8,000 child marriages, supported 2,000 survivors of domestic violence and helped more than 10,000 girls pursue higher education. Learn more: [vikalpindia.org](http://vikalpindia.org)

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*An estimated 65% of women marry before age 18 in rural Rajasthan, India.*

## ACTION RESEARCH WITH YOUNG BRIDES AND GROOMS

Vikalp initiated an action research project to collect primary information about young people who married before age 18, with the ultimate goal of reaching this often isolated population and better meeting their needs. Married girls and young women, in particular, have rarely been the subjects of qualitative studies or program interventions.

### Research Goals:

- Fill gaps in understanding about the lives of young married girls
- Test feasibility of doing further research and working with young brides



*Photo courtesy of Vikalp.*

- Better understand the needs of child brides and increase Vikalp's capacity to respond

### Exploratory Data Collected:

- Surveys and interviews with 188 married girls and young women (ages 13-25) and 104 married boys and young men (ages 13-25) from 31 villages of Udaipur district of Rajasthan, India

## DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

- **Background:** About 90% of the young married women and girls came from the most historically disadvantaged castes and tribes (including the Bheel, Meghwal and Banjara).
- **Education:** Of those who told Vikalp about their education, about 44% of young married women and girls had a high school education, compared to 67% of young married boys and men. About 11% of the young married women and girls were illiterate compared to just 2% of young married boys and men.

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## EMERGING FINDINGS: RESEARCH IN ACTION

### *Common Challenges Facing Young Brides Living in Marital Homes*

- Want to talk and share experiences, but feel scared to speak up
- Experience high rates of sexual and physical violence
- Have limited mobility and are isolated at home
- Controlled by spouse and mother-in-law
- Overwhelmed by childbearing and rearing responsibilities

### *Vikalp's Response*

- Connect them to village-level girls group, where they can gain life skills and increase their self-esteem and confidence
- Provide them counseling and information on criminal justice options; work with spouses to shift beliefs about sexual and masculine behavior norms
- Link them with distance education programs that offer higher education
- Include mothers-in-law in trainings about gender, women's empowerment, health, etc
- Form youth groups specifically for married girls and married boys, respectively, and invite health workers to provide them information on family planning and reproductive health

### *Common Challenges Facing Young Brides Not Yet Living in Marital Homes*

- Not consulted on decisions about her life, which are made by marital family (for example: whether girl should stay in school)
- Must visit marital home for several days whenever there is an important event, even if the trip disrupts her education

### *Vikalp's Response*

- Encourage girls to speak up for themselves and express their wishes
- Work with parents of young brides and grooms and persuade them to prioritize keeping girls in school

## LESSONS LEARNED

- The simple act of listening to the girls seemed to improve their confidence and self-esteem, affirming that their words were worthwhile.
- Establishing trusted relationships through long-term work in communities is a critical first step for gaining access to households and reaching married girls and young women.
- Trained interviewers—who can deal with difficult family members and other challenges—are key to successfully completing interviews with married girls and young women.
- To build deeper trust and draw out experiences and observations from young brides, interviewers need to interact with them frequently over time.

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*“How can we dream now?  
We are married. Our education, our dreams  
are not in our hands now. Now we can only do  
what our marital family allows us to do.  
So we do not have any dreams.”*

— A MARRIED GIRL WHO PARTICIPATED  
IN VIKALP'S RESEARCH

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## FUTURE RESEARCH

This exploratory data has informed a more in-depth, qualitative, 3-year longitudinal research project that is currently underway. Vikalp aims to collect evidence from 200 married girls and young women (ages 13-24) in 10 villages on:

- The prevalence of various forms of violence (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Strategies for coping with violence and support systems that young brides know about and can already access, as well as the services and support they want but do not have
- The experiences of young brides and the similarities and differences in their lives to other women married at older ages

The findings will help Vikalp better understand early and child marriage and related violence in the lives of young brides and design evidence-based interventions to empower and support them.