

# Perceptions of Young Adolescent Girls on Marriage

Research Brief

January 2019

## Background

In India, according to the 2011 census, 3 percent of girls and 2 percent of boys aged 10–14 were already married (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, n.d.). In absolute numbers, this translates to almost 2 million girls and 1 million boys that year. In fact, the proportion of ever-married girls aged 10–14 was as large as one in five or more in 24 districts and one in ten in three districts in India. The 2015–2016 National Family Health Survey findings found that as many as 3 percent of young women aged 15–19 and 7 percent of those aged 20–24 were married before age 15 (IIPS and ICF, 2017a). Although child marriage in India has been extensively studied, the perspectives of young adolescents (aged 10–14 years) have rarely been explored in these studies. Most of the studies have focused on describing the magnitude, trends and consequences of child marriage, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from young people aged 15 or older.

This research brief seeks to fill this gap and describes young adolescent girls' preferences regarding timing of marriage and their perspectives on premarital preparedness and the transformations that take place with marriage. The findings presented in this brief derive from focus group discussions with photo elicitation<sup>1</sup> involving girls aged 10–14 as part of a multi-component study on what works to reduce child marriage in India.

## The study

We conducted a multi-component exploratory study in two districts—Bundi and Chittaurgarh—in Rajasthan State. We located the study in Rajasthan because it is among the top ten states in terms of child marriage prevalence; according to the 2015–2016 National Family

## Findings

The study participants, although young (half of them were aged 10–12 years), displayed an adult insight into the institution of marriage and the socially constructed meanings of marriage.

Yet, they do not passively embody these social messages. Instead, they recognize the constraining effect of marriage, particularly child marriage, and prefer to delay.

Across all the focus group discussions, girls provided consistent and clear reasons for delaying marriage—they wanted to complete their education, take up a job, become self-reliant and adhere to the law, in particular.

They also proposed a range of strategies that girls should adopt for resisting child marriage, which included reasoning with parents; seeking support from friends, teachers or influential adults; and lodging a complaint with the police. Their replies indicate that their desire to marry at a later age is real and they have thought in depth about why they want to delay marriage and what they will do if they are asked to marry early.

Parents' control over the timing of marriage and choice of the groom-to-be and their disregard for their daughters' preferences in the marriage arrangement process persist and can deter many girls from realizing their aspirations for a delayed marriage.

Pre-marriage socialization of girls tends to reinforce entrenched gender inequities and traditional values and norms, which may partly explain the post-marriage vulnerabilities experienced by girls.

Even young adolescents recognize the numerous changes in a girl's life that marriage entails and the challenges for married girls when co-residing with the marital family, with the expectation of new roles and enhanced responsibilities.

There are changes in their feminine identity in terms of appropriate attire, loss of agency, school discontinuation and in the intimate relationship between them and their natal family and the community in which they grew up as well.

<sup>1</sup> Photo elicitation, which involves the use of photographs to encourage a response, has been shown to be of particular value when working with children and young people (Institute for Reproductive Health, 2011). In our study, we showed the focus group discussion participants a series of pictures of a child marriage ceremony, children going to school and children engaged in household chores or work outside the home to encourage the conversation.

Health Survey findings, as many as 35 percent of young women aged 20–24 were married before age 18 (IIPS and ICF, 2017b). Analysis of the 2001 and 2011 census data revealed that the rate of decline in child marriage between the two censuses varied across districts, even among those that recorded similar levels in 2001. We located our study in two districts from among the districts with similar socio-demographic characteristics: In one district, Bundi, the prevalence of child marriage declined at a faster pace than the state average and in the other, Chittaurgarh, it declined at a slower pace.

The study comprised: (i) focus group discussions, with photo elicitation, with young girls aged 10–14; (ii) a survey of unmarried and married girls aged 15–19; (iii) a survey of parents and parents-in-law of girls aged 15–19; (iv) interviews with influential adults in the community (teachers, front-line health workers, village representatives and religious and caste leaders); and (v) in-depth interviews with officials from relevant government departments as Education, Women and Child Development, Health, Social Justice and Law Enforcement (police and judiciary) and representatives of non-government organizations.

A total of six focus group discussions were conducted in six villages—three each from the two districts. These villages were selected from among 48 villages that were selected for the survey of girls aged 15-19 years. The discussions focused on exploring young adolescent girls’ perspectives about the institution of marriage, premarital socialization, transformations that take place with marriage, girls’ preferences regarding timing of marriage, and actions that girls can take to resist child marriage.

A total of 56 girls participated in the group discussions, with nine girls on average in each one. Of them, 26 girls were aged 10–12 and 30 girls were aged 13–14. All girls except two were enrolled in school at the time of the study; 13 girls had completed Classes 4–5 and the remaining 43 girls had completed Classes 6–8. Almost all girls (48 girls) reported that they were not currently engaged in any work. Most of the girls belonged to Other Backward Classes (30 girls) and Scheduled Castes (17 girls). The remaining girls were members of General Castes (four girls) or Scheduled Tribes (five girls). Almost all the girls (50) were unmarried,

and the others were either engaged to be married (two girls) or were married but not yet cohabiting with their husband (four girls).

## Preferences regarding marriage timing

The study participants remarked that most girls of their age prefer to marry at 18 years of age or later. Some reported that girls prefer to marry when they are 24–25 years old and when they have completed their studies. Girls narrated a range of reasons for preferring to delay marriage, including developmental, health and legal factors.

One reason common in all the group discussions was the constraint that marriage imposes on girls’ pursuit of schooling. The girls noted that if they continue their studies, they can get a job, better their living conditions, become self-reliant and bring fame to their parents. Marriage before completing studies meant forgoing these opportunities and dreams. They further noted that girls would not be able to continue their studies because they would have to take care of household chores in their marital home and may get pregnant and face health risks associated with early childbearing.

Girls from district C, village G:

R1–“We want to complete our studies and then marry.”

R (all speak together)–“After completing studies.”

R9–“We will get a job after completing our education.”

R8–“We will get a job.”

R2–“Our life would be better.”

R3–“We will brighten our parents’ name.”

Girls from district B, village P:

Interviewer–“So you girls do not want to get married when you are minors – what is the reason?”

R2–“This is because we cannot complete our studies after going to the in-laws’ house...because we would have to do household chores, then the babies would be born, so our body also gets damaged.”

R3–“Our studies get discontinued and we cannot move ahead in the future.”

R4–“Our dream will not come true.”

R6–“If we became something after studying, we can stand on our own feet and we can do anything. We won’t even need the help of others.”

Participants also noted that minor girls are not capable of taking care of themselves, let alone take on the roles of a daughter-in-law, wife and mother.

Yet another reason against early marriage that participants across the group discussions cited indicated their awareness of the Child Marriage Prohibition Act. They noted that marriage at a young age is illegal and that it is the rule or law to marry at 18 years or later. They also noted that police can arrest persons involved in child marriage.

Girls in our study not only shared the reasons why they and other girls like them in their villages preferred a delayed marriage but also narrated strategies that they have adopted when parents and elders insisted on marriage at a young age. These included “conveying to parents and/or potential groom’s family that they refuse to marry” and convincing parents of the importance of letting them complete their studies before getting married, their inability to manage the roles and responsibilities that marriage entails, and the illegality of marriage as minors.

Girls from district C, village C:

R2–They try to tell their parents that they won’t marry.

R5–They tell their parents that we are growing up and being educated.

R3–They tell their parents that it is a legal offence.

Potential strategies that the participants proposed also included seeking support from friends, elders in the family and in the community, teachers and front-line workers, like *anganwadi* workers, so that they can reason with parents and intervene to prevent the marriage of minors. Taking advantage of the provisions of the Child Marriage Prohibition Act, girls also suggested that they could go to the police and lodge a complaint.

Most tragically, participants in two group discussions reported that girls could take such extreme actions as making efforts to commit suicide or running away from home to escape marriage at a young age.

Despite their strong aversion to marriage at a young age, the study participants also reported that some girls, particularly very young girls, enjoy entering into marriage because “they get a lot of money”, “they can ride a horse when they are taken out for *bindauri* [marriage procession]”, “they get a lot of dresses”, “an album of their photos would be made” and because they “get excellent food to eat and new jewelry, both gold and silver jewelry, in their in-laws’ house”. They elaborated that parents entice young girls with offers of sweets and new dresses at the time of marriage and that girls who want to marry young are misled by these ideas about the wedding itself (food, clothes, money, jewelry) without any information on what marriage actually entails.

### Perceptions about pre-marriage socialization and marriage preparedness

Girls reported that young brides do not have any idea about their marriage—they are just told they will go to their in-laws’ home. Some are told they will go there to play, and some of the rituals, for example, making the groom and bride open the *kakandor*<sup>2</sup> and play the ring game<sup>3</sup> may make the young brides believe what their parents are telling them.

Girls from district B, village P:

R3–“Some girls are so young that they do not even know what marriage is.”

R8–“They [parents or elders] tell her that it is a game. It is only a game for her when she does not understand what marriage is.”

And many found out that they are going to get married only when parents brought home clothes and jewelry that they are to wear on their wedding day or asked them to go with them to buy those goods, or when they overheard parental discussion about their marriage. As one girl explained, “Parents talk to each other, and she gets to know then that her marriage is taking place.”

Girls reported that young brides are advised not to tell anyone about their impending marriage; sometimes,

<sup>2</sup> A game in which the groom and bride are asked to undo for each other the knot on the thread tied round their wrists; while the groom is allowed to use only one hand to open the thread knot, the bride is allowed to use both hands.

<sup>3</sup> Ring game takes place at the groom’s home when the couple arrives. They are given a bowl or plate filled with water colored with vermilion and turmeric into which a ring and two seashells are placed. They are then asked to find the ring using one hand. The family and community members gather around and sing traditional ritual songs during this game. Whoever finds the ring first is declared the winner, and the other person is asked to obey the winner for the next seven births.

they were not even allowed to go to anyone's house or to school till the marriage had taken place. Minor girls were also advised to misreport their age:

A girl from district B, village KW:

Interviewer-“What are girls told at the time of their marriage or before marriage?”

R2-“If they do a young girl's marriage, they tell her that she should tell others that she is older than she really is and not her real age.

Girls emphasized that young girls were never asked whether they approved of or liked the groom. In only one group discussion did the girls agree that young girls are consulted about their preferences.

However, participants across all the group discussions reported that girls were advised on the dos and don'ts of how to behave in their marital home. They suggested that girls were reminded constantly of how they should behave with their in-laws, husband and others. Submissiveness was emphasized, and girls were instructed to “keep their in-laws happy”, “obey their husband and in-laws”, “not to speak much in front of their husband and elders in the family” and “to touch the feet of everyone” (as a mark of respect). Moreover, girls were expected to “not pick fights with anyone in the marital home” and “not return to the natal home after fighting with marital family members”. They were expected to display lady-like demeanor and be shy and quiet. They were advised “to take care of all the responsibilities—doing household chores and doing unpaid work in the family farm—in their in-laws' house” and “to take care of all at the marital home”. They were advised that “they should wake up early in the morning in their in-law's place”. Girls were told what they should wear and what they should not, for example, covering their head in the marital home as a sign of respect to their in-laws.

## **Transformations that come with marriage for girls**

The study participants narrated a number of transformations that marriage entails for girls.

### **Union formation**

Girls in all the group discussions agreed that marriage marks the union between a male and a female and is a

union that is binding forever and extends beyond one's life. They pointed out that with marriage, “the girl will live with her husband”, “she gets bound in a bond and has to spend the rest of her life with her husband”. They further elaborated that “marriage rounds<sup>4</sup> happen so that the couple lives together for the rest of their lives and live together for seven births” and “they both get tied in a knot and they both become husband and wife”.

### **Alliance between two families and new living arrangement**

Girls in all the group discussions suggested that marriage is an alliance between two families, and this means that girls “get a new family and have to manage two families after marriage—their parents' and their in-laws' family”—and thus they “brighten two families”. One of the girls described the new living arrangement thus: “She goes to someone else's house, that is, a girl is sent to her in-laws' place.” They also recognized the break from co-residence with their natal family, because “girls cannot live with their parents for their entire life”.

Girls described the process of transition to co-residence with the marital family as smooth for some and abrupt and without preparation for others. They noted that families sometimes tried to smoothen this transition by sending girls to the marital family for short duration stays (a day to a month) off and on and in the company of other girls from the natal family:

Girls from district C, village O:

R1-“Her farewell takes place, and the girl goes with her husband.”

R3-“Yes, she is sent, one other girl is also sent along with her.”

Interviewer-“Who goes along with the bride when her farewell happens?”

R2-“Aunt's daughter, uncle's daughter and I had also gone there like when my sister got married.”

Interviewer-“What else happens?”

R4-“And she is brought back from her in-laws' house a few days later and she remains in her natal home for a month or 15 days and then she is sent back to her in-laws' house again and it keeps happening like this for some time.”

<sup>4</sup> A ritual in which the couple walks seven rounds around the sacred fire and takes seven sacred vows, which both the bride and groom must abide for life.

For some other girls, the transition is completed over just two visits: “She stays at her in-laws’ place for one or two days immediately after her wedding, and then she is sent there when she is grown up.” In such cases, the second and the permanent transition may take place after completing her studies, one or two years or three to four years following marriage or after a girl is considered grown-up, which could be after she turns 15 or 16 or even 18 or 19. Girls explained that parents sometimes negotiate with their in-laws to let a girl stay with her natal family for some time. Thus, as one of the participants noted, “If a girl’s marriage takes place at a minor age and if she does not want to go to her in-laws house immediately, she talks to her family and then her family talks to her in-laws to let her stay with them for some time.”

Girls also reported that for some girls, co-residence with the marital family takes place immediately after marriage, particularly if the girl is not studying and because of demands for her labor. As one participant suggested: “Some are sent to their in-laws’ house on the same day of their wedding because they [in-laws] say that we have to harvest maize and we have lots of household chores in our home.”

Even though there is typically a delay between marriage and cohabitation in child marriages, girls’ narratives across all the group discussions show that considerable interactions do take place between husband and wife before the girl settles permanently in her marital home. Girls reported that husbands and wives meet during festivals, marriages and other functions in either family and during school vacations. Girls also told us that young men visit their wife at their home often—“he comes to meet her after every one or two months”—or they go out to spend time together (“when they go somewhere for a meal together” or “they meet when they go to roam around”). Such interactions can take place at the initiative of girls also and sometimes surreptitiously, too as one participant noted: “She calls him to meet when no one is in her house.” With increased access to mobile phones, these interactions take place over the phone also: “They also talk to each other on the phone” or “her husband has also sent her a small mobile phone so she talks to him over the phone.”

## **Assumption of new roles and enhanced responsibilities**

The group discussion participants recognized that marriage heralds the assumption of new roles and responsibilities for girls. Most importantly, they noted that marriage means procreation and the continuation of the family: “How will there be a next generation if girls continue to live with their parents?” Girls in all the group discussions reported that marriage means motherhood: “She goes to her in-laws’ house and she becomes the mother of her children.”

Beyond reproduction, marriage signified huge work expectations—doing household chores as well as unpaid work in the family farm—for these girls. Girls in a couple of the group discussions noted that girls like them were not asked to do household chores before marriage, but they were required to take care of household chores in their marital home: “She is not made to do household chores before marriage” and “She is asked to do work only when she goes to in-laws house.” Others noted that although adolescent girls were expected to do household chores even in their natal home, they were expected to do a lot more in their marital home. They were also expected to work in the family farm.

Girls from district B, village K:

Interviewer—“What else happens after marriage?”

R1—“She has to do household chores in their in-laws’ house.”

R2—“She does not do household chores so much when she lives in her parents’ house, but there is lot of work after going there and she has to do all that.”

R4—“She does farming.”

## **Changes in feminine identity**

Marriage entailed noticeable changes in feminine identity. Girls’ narratives show that what is considered appropriate clothing for girls in the post-puberty stage is no longer considered appropriate once they are married, as reflected in the comment of a participant: “First, she wears a suit [*salwar kameez*], and then she starts wearing a sari after getting married.”

Married girls are expected to not wear transparent, revealing or fashionable clothes or a suit without covering

her head with a veil. Instead, they are expected to wear a sari, vermilion, bangles, toe rings and so on. Covering the head (veiling) becomes part of girls' routine attire once married. Girls who violate these norms are scolded by family members and neighbors. They are also expected to display "lady-like" demeanor, including shyness and speaking as little as possible.

Girls from district C, village O:

R1- "Now, you have to live with your husband and you have to cover your face with a veil there. You cannot wear such transparent clothes there; I mean thin dress and you can't try to copy others' dress style, you do not wear your suit without a veil, people will tell you that now you got married, so all these things do not suit you."

R2- "You wear sari there."

Girls from district C, village C:

R- "Some do not go to study because they have to wear sari and *sindoor* [vermilion]."

R- "If she wears suit after marriage, they scold her and tell her that now you wear sari because you have grown up and if you out, you should only wear a sari."

## Loss of agency

Marriage imposed many restrictions on girls' freedom to express themselves, freedom to interact with others, particularly with boys, and freedom of movement. Girls reported that married girls are expected to consult their husband and other family members in their home for doing anything: "She gets restricted in all things and she is not allowed to do any work without consulting her husband and her in-laws"; "She has to obey whatever her parents-in-law say to her." Once married, girls were advised "not to roam here and there", "not to go to other's house" and "not to defame their in-laws" while their unmarried counterparts were not so restrained. They were also restrained from talking to others ("Don't talk much to anyone") and in particular, with men or boys ("Don't talk to boys").

## School continuation and discontinuation

The findings of the group discussions reveal two distinct patterns regarding school continuation for girls following marriage. Girls across all the group discussions reported that some girls, perhaps "half", continued their studies even after getting married, while another "half" were required to discontinue their studies.

Girls from district C, village C:

R3- "Half of the parents send their daughters to school after marriage and half don't."

R2- "Here is my oldest aunt, she has a younger daughter whose marriage was done when she used to study in Class 10, and she still goes to school after getting married."

Interviewer- "Up to which class do these girls continue their studies?"

R- "They study up to class 10 and 12. Some are doing graduation, some also study from their in-laws' house, some do B.A. from their in-laws' house, some even become something too and they go from their in-laws' house to work."

The reasons offered for school discontinuation post-marriage varied. Girls suggested that some married girls discontinue because of their own lack of interest in continuing their studies: "Only those girls continue to go to school who are interested in studies and who want to study." The burden of household chores and demands on girls' labor can force some girls to discontinue their studies, as comments from several participants suggest: "She has to do household chores, and some go to the fields to work and that is why they don't go to school", and "She also has to discontinue her studies if there is no one in her in-laws' house to do household chores."

The group discussion participants also suggested that opposition from parents or parents-in-law may prevent girls from continuing their studies post-marriage. One girl noted, "Some in-laws say that now you are married, so do not go to school anymore." They also said that parents-in-law may worry about any transgressions by girls when they go to school, as one participant explained: "This is because who knows what she would do after going out, how would her parents-in-law know if she starts talking to other boys after going out." School continuation after marriage is also regarded as defying the norms of seclusion and veiling: "Some people practice the ritual of veiling, and they do not consider it right for a married girl to go out like this." Perceptions among marital family members that girls should not work after completing their studies may also act as a deterrent to school continuation among married girls. Participants commented: "They [in-laws] think what will she do after getting an education, she will be made to do household chores only." Or, "some [husbands] do not like their wife doing a job and that is why they want to make her do their household chores only."

## ***Changes in the attitudes and behaviors of natal family and community members toward married girls***

Girls in our study also discussed the changes that take place in attitudes and practices of natal family members, neighbors and community members once girls are married, although perceptions were mixed.

Some group discussion participants reported that “they [family members, neighbors or others in the village] behave in the same way with the girl as they used to before she got married”. However, many others reported changes in the attitudes and practices of families and communities once girls were married. For example, “Not all parents behave the same as they used to with their daughter when she was unmarried.” And, “Daughters are not loved as much after marriage, as she goes to her in-laws’ house, they forget her gradually, and they love their sons more.”

During the transitional period between marriage and cohabitation, the natal family members may even taunt girls if they do not learn to do household chores, saying: “You have not learned how to cook yet, what will you do after going there? Your in-laws will say that we taught you nothing and that is why you do not know how to do this and how to do that.” They may even threaten her, saying: “If you do not know how to do household chores in your in-laws’ house, your in-laws will not keep you there, your husband will divorce you and send you back here to our house and we will not keep you.” Or, “If you do not do household chores, we will send you to your in-laws’ house right away.” Or, “You will humiliate us after going to your in-laws’ house.”.

On participant noted that the neighbors and others in the village do not “give girls the same honor as they used to give her when she was unmarried; they consider her as someone else’s property”. These community members help enforce norms related to appropriate attire and behavior for married girls, such as, telling the girls: “Don’t wear a suit but wear a long skirt when your in-laws come.” Or, “Now you should not roam around like this, don’t fight with anyone and don’t talk with boys.” They also tended to encourage parents to withdraw their daughters from school after marriage. “They tell her family to discontinue her studies,” said one participant.

## **Recommendations**

Several lessons can be drawn from the narratives of young adolescent girls who participated in the study. These

lessons can inform programmes to prevent child marriage and address the gender-unequal social norms at the root of girls’ experiences, and the seclusion and vulnerability that young brides may experience post-marriage. Most importantly, the findings call for:

### ***Fostering meaningful consent and respecting girls’ desires and rights.***

The findings underscore that it is important to work with parents to foster the idea of consent to marriage—a notion codified in international agreements as well as in Indian policies—to encourage parents to solicit and respect their daughter’s views on the timing of marriage and choice of husband. This would entail working with both parents and their daughters to build awareness of human rights and to critically examine the social norms that do not allow girls or boys to have a say in the timing of marriage or choice of their spouse. People and institutions respected in the community as leaders can be trained and enlisted to speak out on this topic.

### ***Working with parents and communities to critically reflect and modify pre-marriage socialization of girls.***

The findings also call for working with parents and communities to foster critical reflection of the pre-marriage socialization of girls that expect them to be submissive at their marital home, speak as little as possible and not to stand up for their rights. It is important to create new and alternative narratives for post-marriage feminine and masculine roles.

## **Acknowledgments**

The author is grateful to the American Jewish World Service for supporting this study. In particular, the author is grateful to Manjima Bhattacharjya for her support and guidance throughout the course of this project. The author is extremely grateful to Smt. Richa Khoda, Commissioner of the, Women Empowerment Department of the, Government of Rajasthan, Jaipur, for giving the permission to conduct this study in Bundi and Chittaurgarh districts of Rajasthan, India. The author would like to gratefully acknowledge insightful comments that Shireen J. Jejeebhoy made on earlier versions of this brief; Sudhir Varma for supporting us in conducting the study; Annu Kurien for her inputs in the editing of the brief; and Komal Saxena for help in the design and production of this brief.

## References

1. Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner (n.d.). *Marital status by age and sex, India*. New Delhi. Available at [www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-series/c-2/DDW-0000C-02-fer3-MDDS.xlsx](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-series/c-2/DDW-0000C-02-fer3-MDDS.xlsx).
2. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF (2017a). *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015–16: India*. Mumbai: IIPS.
3. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF (2017b). *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015–16: Rajasthan*. Mumbai: IIPS.
4. Institute for Reproductive Health (2011). *Utilizing Participatory Data Collection Methods to Evaluate Programs for Very Young Adolescents: An Evaluation of Save the Children's Choices Curriculum in Siraha, Nepal*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University for the US Agency for International Development.

The Population Council conducts research and delivers solutions that improve lives around the world. Big ideas supported by evidence: It's our model for global change. [www.popcouncil.org](http://www.popcouncil.org)

### Suggested citation

Santhya, K.G. 2019. *Perceptions of Young Adolescent Girls on Marriage: Research brief*. New Delhi: Population

Population Council  
Zone 5A, Ground Floor  
India Habitat Centre, Lodi Road  
New Delhi, India 110 003  
Phone: 91-11-24642901  
Email: [info.india@popcouncil.org](mailto:info.india@popcouncil.org)  
Website: [www.popcouncil.org](http://www.popcouncil.org)

© 2019. The Population Council, Inc.