



# **Child Marriage and Early Child-bearing in India: Risk Factors and Policy Implications**

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# About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)

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# Summary

Prevalence rates of child marriage and early child-bearing have been declining across India over the past two decades, but absolute numbers remain high. This paper uses data collected from 3,000 children over 15 years in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana by Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty, to provide an evidence base from which to strengthen policy and programming in this area.

An ecological life-course framework is used to explore the causes of child marriage and early child-bearing and the factors which help to prevent them. Findings show that girls who stay in school for longer marry later, but gender gaps in enrolment widen during adolescence; where household resources are limited, gendered social risks become more acute and parents are forced to make decisions which disadvantage girls; aspirations matter but reflect wider realities; and social norms that encourage early child-bearing are compounded by inequitable access to health and education services.

The paper finds that, whilst child marriage and early child-bearing are driven by entrenched patriarchal norms regarding the role and value of girls (and women) in society, structural factors are critical. Poverty and social disadvantage constrain girls' opportunities and exacerbate the risks they face, forcing individual girls and their families to maintain 'normal' practices, thus reinforcing norms. An ecological life-course framework helps to demonstrate the need for a layered strategy to tackle the gendered disadvantages which drive child marriage and early child-bearing.

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# 1. Introduction

India's economy has been transformed by fast-paced growth over recent years and is now among the strongest in the world. Life expectancy, literacy rates and health have improved and a substantial middle class has emerged. India is seeing the largest rural–urban migration of this century, as 10 million people move to towns and cities every year (World Bank 2016). Government measures have led to near-universal enrolment of children at lower primary school level (Galab et al. 2014a), as well as increased parity in enrolment between girls and boys.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the last two decades have witnessed declining rates of child marriage and early child-bearing. In Andhra Pradesh for example, 68.6 per cent of women aged 20–24 had been married by the age of 18 in 1992 (IIPS 1995), falling to 32.7 per cent in 2015 (IIPS 2016a).<sup>2</sup>

Yet the Indian population is divided by large-scale inequality and poverty. A third of the population live below the poverty line of US\$1.25 per day (UNICEF 2015) and there are striking disparities along lines of gender, socio-economic status, caste, ethnicity, religion and location regarding access to services, livelihood opportunities and social mobility. India also remains among the top ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage in the world. One in three of all child marriages take place in India (UNICEF 2014) and rates are highest among the poorest and most socially disadvantaged. Incidence of early child-bearing is also high – one in six adolescents between 15 and 19 years old had already given birth to their first child in 2012 (UNICEF 2012) and in 2010, India had the highest total number of 20–24 year olds who had given birth for the first time before the age of 18 in the world – almost 12 million girls (Edilberto and Mengjia 2013).

Child marriage can lead to poorer outcomes for both boys and girls. They are often excluded from decisions regarding when or who to marry, and marriage at a young age may preclude their enjoyment of basic freedoms, such as 'opportunities for education, earning a sustainable livelihood and accessing sexual health and rights' (Nirantar Trust 2015: 7). Girls are more likely to experience child marriage than boys and the unequal power many young brides experience in the marital household can leave them exposed to emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Moreover, in a context where fertility is strongly tied to marriage, first pregnancy and childbirth often follow quickly after marriage, risking the health of both the young mother and her baby. Early child-bearing puts young mothers (particularly those under 15 years old) at risk of 'placental tears; obstruction at the time of delivery; obstetric fistulae, and death' (UNFPA 2015: 9), and increases the risk of infant mortality and babies being born with low birth weight, malnutrition and anaemia.

It is in this context that the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) and the Ministry of Human Resource Development have initiated the new Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao scheme, aimed at addressing gender-imbalanced sex ratios and child marriage in 100 districts. The MoHFW has also launched the National Adolescent Health Strategy (Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram – RKSK), which takes a holistic approach in responding to the health and development needs of India's 240 million adolescents (aged 10–19 years old) (Government of India and MoHFW 2014). The MoHFW has identified that determining the risk and protective factors of child marriage and early child-bearing is essential for strengthening policy and programming for adolescents. In response, this report uses data collected from 3,000 children over 16 years in Andhra Pradesh and

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1 These measures include the Education for All Programme and the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009.

2 The state of Andhra Pradesh bifurcated in 2014 into the two states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The NFHS-4 (2015/16) figure used here relates to Andhra Pradesh only; the figure for Telangana was 25.7 per cent.

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Telangana by Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty, to address the following research questions:

1. Which girls are most at risk of marrying and giving birth early?
2. What prevents girls from marrying and giving birth early?

In answering the first question, we use Young Lives descriptive statistics and regression analysis to build a profile of the girls most likely to experience child marriage and early child-bearing, showing the age at which they are marrying and who they getting married to. In response to the second, the report uses an ecological life-course framework to explore the causes of child marriage and early child-bearing and the factors which help to prevent them. Young Lives evidence points to the following conclusions:<sup>3</sup>

- Girls who stay in school for longer marry later. *Girls who had left school by the age of 15 were four times more likely to experience child marriage than girls who were still enrolled at the same age.* Gender gaps in enrolment widen during adolescence as social norms that disadvantage girls become more salient and interact with structural factors, such as poverty and limited access to quality schooling.
- Poverty is a risk factor. *Girls from the poorest households were twice as likely to be married by the age of 18 as those from the least-poor households.* Where resources are limited, gendered social risks become more acute and parents are forced to make decisions which disadvantage girls.
- Aspirations matter but reflect wider realities. *Girls whose parents had the lowest educational aspirations for them (at the age of 12) were twice as likely to be married by the age of 18 as those whose parents had the highest educational aspirations.* Girls' and caregivers' aspirations fall during adolescence as girls' lack of opportunities and vulnerability to gendered risks become more pronounced.
- Social norms that encourage early child-bearing are compounded by inequitable access to health and education services. This causes some married girls to give birth earlier than others. *Young people reported having very little knowledge about sexual and reproductive health before first pregnancy.*

These findings highlight that, while child marriage and early child-bearing are driven by entrenched patriarchal norms regarding the role and value of girls (and women) in society, structural factors are critical. Poverty and social disadvantage constrain girls' opportunities and exacerbate the risks they face, forcing individuals and families to maintain 'normal' practices, thus reinforcing norms. The report uses an 'ecological life-course' framework, which helps to demonstrate the need for a layered strategy to tackle the gendered disadvantages that drive child marriage and early child-bearing.

There are a number of government measures in place already which are helping to address these disadvantages, including the provision of residential schools and boarding facilities for children from Scheduled Tribes and other groups living in remote areas,<sup>4</sup> enabling more socially disadvantaged girls to attend better schools in urban settings for free. There is also the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which has been shown to positively influence girls' school attendance and performance through its impact on women's

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3 The statistical statements below are based on descriptive statistics regarding girls married below the age of 18. However the trends described remained significant during regression analysis using data on girls married below the age of 19.

4 Scheduled Tribes are indigenous communities which typically live in more remote areas and are traditionally disadvantaged.

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bargaining power in the household (Pells and Woodhead 2014). These and other possible interventions are highlighted in a brief summary of policy implications at the end of the report.

## **1.1 Ecological life-course framework for understanding what shapes girls' opportunities**

The ecological model depicts child development as occurring within a set of interlocking systems, influenced by immediate processes, such as familial relationships and household circumstances, as well by the more remote factors which shape them, such as livelihood opportunities and access to services. Incorporating a life-course perspective enhances this model in a number of ways. It helps us to 'analyse the impact of earlier circumstances on later outcomes' (Dornan and Woodhead 2015: 9) and adds that 'children are active in shaping their development, according to their capacities, agency and identity' (ibid.).

An ecological life-course perspective emphasises the need to look beyond child development and explore the complex role played by societal contexts, such as social norms and structural factors, in determining children's experiences; the opportunities, risks and protective factors children are exposed to; and children's own (and others') aspirations and expectations for the future. It is important to remember that these societal contexts are not static and that lives operate in the context of social and historical change (ibid.). Even gender norms, which are so fundamental in shaping attitudes and behaviour, are not immutable, as demonstrated by declining rates of child marriage in recent years.

Using an ecological life-course framework to examine the causes of child marriage and early child-bearing reveals the importance of addressing both 'development of society' and 'development for adolescent girls' – ensuring, for example, that society provides girls with more opportunities and that individual girls have the capacity and resources necessary to make use of them. It helps to illuminate the structural inequalities and social norms that restrict individual agency and opportunity, and undermine household security and well-being. Lastly, it demonstrates that by creating a more enabling environment for communities, families and individuals, it may be possible to counter the incentives for adhering to customary gendered practices such as child marriage.

## **1.2 Definitions**

The report uses the term 'child marriage', as opposed to 'early marriage', in recognition of the current priorities of the MoHFW. It is a marriage where either party is a child, defined as someone under 18 years old.<sup>5</sup>

In some places, analysis has been drawn from Young Lives datasets that include girls who married at 19 years old or younger. In these instances, the term 'teenage marriage' has been used for clarity.

The term 'early child-bearing' has been used to describe any births to Young Lives girls occurring within their teenage years, i.e. up to and including the age of 19.

The term 'adolescent' refers to any person aged between 10 and 19 years old, as per the definition used by the United Nations. The period of adolescence can be separated into three stages: early (10–13 years of age), middle (14–16), and late (17–19).

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<sup>5</sup> This definition aligns with international norms and standards, as in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, in India, 'child' refers to a female who is not yet 18 years old and a male who is not yet 21 years old (PCMA 2006).

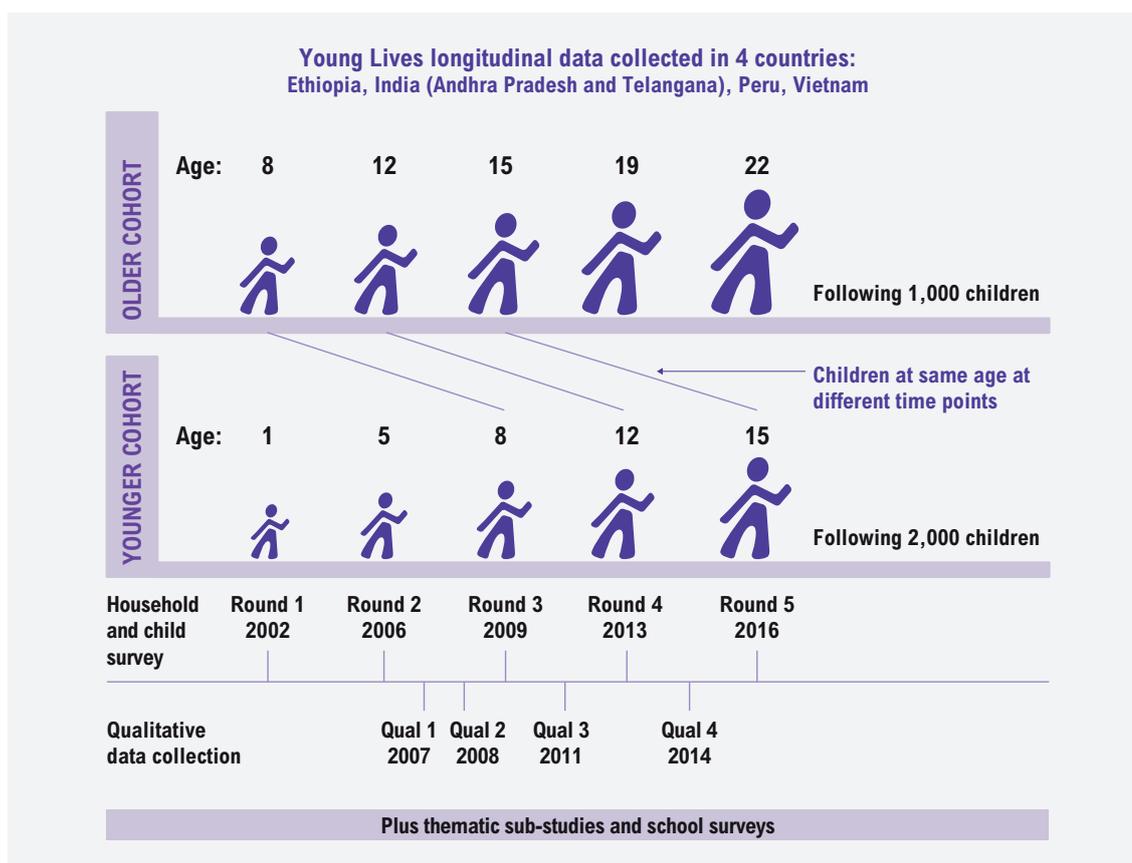
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## 2. Method

Young Lives is an international research study following the lives of 12,000 children over 15 years in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. The study has collected longitudinal data in Andhra Pradesh since 2002 and follows two cohorts of children – a Younger Cohort of 2,000 children and an Older Cohort of 1,000. The Younger Cohort has been followed by Young Lives since they were 6–18 months old and the Older Cohort since they were 7–8 years old. The sample is pro-poor and, while not strictly representative, ‘covers the diversity of children in Andhra Pradesh in a wide variety of attributes and experiences’ (Kumra 2008: 3).

Since 2002, the children have taken part in four rounds of quantitative data collection and a smaller, nested sample of 50 children has taken part in four rounds of qualitative data collection. In the quantitative rounds, Young Lives collected data from both children and their primary caregivers through extensive household surveys. In the qualitative rounds, in-depth interviews and group work were conducted with children, primary caregivers, teachers and community representatives. Figure 1 depicts the timing of the quantitative and qualitative data collection in relation to the ages of the children/young people.

**Figure 1. Survey dates and ages of Young Lives sample children**



### 2.1 Suitability of dataset

The vast majority of available data regarding child marriage and early child-bearing in India have been drawn from cross-sectional research, conducted at single points in time and giving a ‘snapshot’ of prevalence and practice. Cross-sectional data can explore factors that are linked with the chances of child marriage, but it is limited in its capacity to determine

why, when and how risks develop and accumulate with time (Morrow and Dornan 2015). Contrastingly, there are some key benefits to using Young Lives longitudinal, cohort-sequential data to explore child marriage in India (see Box 1).

It is important to note, however, that the Young Lives study is not a direct study of child marriage. It provides a wealth of data relating to young people's pathways through childhood and adolescence, including their transitions into marriage, but it by no means provides an exhaustive assessment of all the relevant drivers of child marriage and the factors that might protect against it. There are some areas this report will therefore not touch upon, one of the most significant being awareness, implementation and impact of the law.

### **Box 1. Suitability of Young Lives data for investigating child marriage in India**

1. Young Lives longitudinal data reveal links between earlier circumstances and later outcomes – including those which place girls at greater or lesser risk of child marriage (Morrow and Dornan 2015). For example, regression analysis reveals a link between early parental aspirations for daughters' education and girls' subsequent educational outcomes (Serneels and Dercon 2014).
2. Young Lives data allow us to analyse how patterns change or persist over time, so that (rather than assessing only the magnitude or dimensions of child marriage) we are able to identify changes and intervention opportunities at critical points in the lives of girls at risk (Morrow and Dornan 2015). For example, Young Lives can identify the phase in childhood when caregivers' aspirations for their daughters' education begin to fall.
3. Each cohort is surveyed at the same age but at different points in time, thus making it possible to compare the two cohorts' experiences of the same points in the life course, seven years apart. By doing so, we are able to detect the impacts on children of changes in the contexts in which they live.
4. Compared to cross-sectional studies, Young Lives is able to ascertain the age at marriage and at the birth of the first child with more accuracy (Singh and Vennam 2016). It has also gathered detailed information about both the natal and spousal homes – information about natal homes being largely absent from cross-sectional studies since gendered norms often see married girls move into the homes of their in-laws (Singh and Espinoza 2016).
5. Owing to the breadth and depth of the quantitative survey, Young Lives has been able to provide what may be 'the first detailed quantitative investigation linking parental aspirations and expectations through childhood, investments in [girls'] education and various contextual factors including socio-economic characteristics of the parental household to the probability of teenage marriage and fertility in this context' (ibid.: 4).
6. Lastly, Young Lives is the only cohort study in India covering the relevant life-course period. Our data are extremely current and therefore particularly appropriate for helping devise policy interventions that reflect contemporary contexts, as opposed to data from other studies, where participants have been affected by different socio-economic conditions (ibid.).

## 3. Background

### 3.1 Legislative framework

India has ratified a number of international human rights conventions of relevance to the prevention of child marriage and to the protection of adolescent sexual and reproductive health. These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). It has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but with reservations regarding its own capacity to address child marriage in the context of high levels of poverty.

India's national legislative framework has contained a law prescribing a minimum age of marriage since 1929. The Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) (also known as the 'Sarda Act') originally prohibited the marriage of girls below the age of 15 and boys below the age of 18, though by 1978 this had been increased to 18 for girls and 21 for boys. It provided that any adult man who contracted or solemnised a child marriage could be punished with imprisonment for up to three months or a fine. There were challenges associated with the CMRA, including that it was 'considered to be ineffectual and its implementation weak', resulting in only a small number of prosecutions each year (UNICEF 2011a: 7). It was also opposed early on by members of the Muslim population, leading to its supersession by the Muslim Personal Law Application Act of 1937, which allowed for parental or guardian consent for Muslim marriages with no minimum age limit (*ibid.*; Tandon forthcoming).

In 2006, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) replaced the CMRA. Viewed as a more progressive piece of legislation, the law not only prohibits child marriages, but also allows for the annulment of any such marriage, with petitions accepted up to two years after the child reaches his/her majority (i.e. up to 20 years old for girls and 23 years old for boys). The Act also augments the punishment for any adult male who enters into marriage with a child, increasing the sentencing options to up to two years imprisonment and/or a fine of up to 1 lakh. Similar sentences are prescribed for those who perform, conduct, direct, abet or solemnise a child marriage (UNICEF 2011a). Nevertheless, the law retains the same definition of child marriage – for girls under 18 and for boys under 21 – and implementation has again been described as weak, with only 280 and 222 cases registered nationally in 2014 and 2013 respectively (*ibid.*).

Registration of marriage has been made compulsory under a number of different Acts – the Christian Marriage Act of 1872, the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act of 1936, and the Special Marriage Act of 1954 – but is optional for Hindu marriages under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. However, in 2006, the Supreme Court directed all State Governments to create and implement rules regarding the compulsory registration of all marriages, regardless of religion, in order to improve the enforcement of the prohibition on child marriage (MWCD 2011). United Andhra Pradesh was among those state governments which enacted compulsory registration into law, though the validity of marriages is not necessarily compromised by non-registration (UNICEF 2011a).

The Dowry Prohibition Act has been in place since 1961 and prohibits giving or taking dowry or abetting the practice of dowry, with associated sentences of no less than five years imprisonment and a fine of at least Rs.15,000. Demanding a dowry is also punishable with imprisonment (of no less than six months) and a fine (of up to Rs.10,000). However, the law

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does not extend to ‘presents which are given at the time of a marriage to the bride ... [or] to the bridegroom (without any demand having been made in that behalf)’ (Dowry Prohibition Act 1961: Article 3, section 1a and 1b).<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2 National policies

A recent mapping exercise carried out by Young Lives identified some of the key policy initiatives implemented since 2000 towards the reduction of child marriage and early child-bearing. These and some additional policies of relevance are described briefly below (Tandon forthcoming):

**Table 1. National policies relevant to child marriage and early child-bearing, 2000–2016**

Policy	Relevance to child marriage/early child-bearing
National Population Policy, 2000	Aims to achieve 100 per cent registration of births, deaths, marriage and pregnancies by 2010
National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001	Conceived to introduce interventions and special programmes to encourage delaying the age of marriage so that by 2010 child marriage is eliminated
National AIDS Prevention and Control Policy, 2002	Aims to promote a better understanding of HIV infection and safer sex practices among the young
The National Youth Policy, 2003, and the more recent National Youth Policy, 2014	Emphasises the multiple needs of the young and identifies 11 priority areas and multipronged actions with specific strategies to address the needs of adolescents in a holistic manner
National Plan of Action for Children, 2005	Aims to achieve 100 per cent registration of births, deaths, marriages and pregnancies by 2010, elimination of child marriages by 2010, and stopping the sale of children and all forms of child trafficking, including for marriage
India’s Eleventh and Twelfth Five-Year Plans	The Eleventh Five-Year Plan included a focus on the ‘compulsory registration of marriages and verification of age at the time of marriage’, and the Twelfth proposed a Girl Child Specific District Plan of Action towards ‘advancing rights of the Girl Child with measurable outcomes on increased CSR [child sex ratio] and age at marriage’, particularly for districts with a low CSR and a high incidence of child marriage (MWCD 2013: 3).
Draft National Strategy Document on the Prevention of Child Marriage (2013)	Identifies strategic areas of intervention, including law enforcement, access to quality education and other opportunities, changing mind-sets and social norms, the empowerment of adolescents, knowledge and data management and the development of monitorable indicators. The draft has yet to be finalised (MWCD 2013: 3).
Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao scheme (2015)	Aims to improve the Child Sex Ratio in 100 Gender Critical Districts (MWCD 2014), the imbalance of which exacerbates the buying of young brides in some states (HAQ: Centre for Child Rights 2006). It also aims to address the ‘patriarchal mind-set’ to ensure gender equality for girls, as well as to increase access to education and improve the participation of girls at ‘all levels of social, economic and political leadership’ (MWCD 2014: 2).
Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2015)	Identifies increasing the participation of women in the labour force as key to improving the economic growth of the country. Includes provisions regarding the delivery of skills training to out-of-school children, adolescent girls, housewives and rural young people (Tandon forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> Other laws that include provisions relating to child marriage and/or to adolescent sexual and reproductive health include Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act (JJ Act) of 2000 and its subsequent Amendment Act of 2006; the Indian Penal Code (and Amendment of 2013); the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 (and Amendment of 2002); the Protection of Children from Sexual Abuse Act, 2013; the National Commission for Women Act, 1990; the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (ITPA); and the Commission for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005.

### 3.3 Prevalence

#### 3.3.1 National-level data

Alongside increased legislative and policy focus on preventing child marriage and early child-bearing, there has been a decline in prevalence rates over a number of years. The trend is observable across large-scale datasets, including the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, which show a fall of approximately 9 percentage points in child marriage nationally between 1993 and 2006 (UNICEF 2011b). The mean age at marriage has increased from 19.3 years in 1990 to 21.2 in 2011 (Census of India 2011), and falling rates of child marriage can be seen across the whole country. Nevertheless, the volume of child marriages taking place each year remains extraordinarily high and declining prevalence rates should not distract attention from what is still a substantial problem. The Indian population is increasing year on year and so rapid declines in prevalence rates are not necessarily recognisable when viewed in terms of absolute numbers. Indeed, by far the largest number of child marriages take place in India compared to any other country in the world. In 2011 for example, the Census of India reported that almost 17 million children/ young people aged 10–19 were already married, 76 per cent of whom were girls. This represented an increase of 0.9 million children in comparison to the 2001 Census figures (Singh and Vennam 2016).

The incidence of child marriage is inequitably spread geographically and across different social groups, affected by factors such as gender, socio-economic status, caste, religion and education. There is a stark difference, for instance, in the prevalence of child marriage between girls and boys, with 19 per cent of girls aged 15–17 and only 7 per cent of boys aged 15–20 married at the time of NFHS-3, in 2005/6 (Parasuraman et al. 2009). This is still a large number of boys and they are not immune to many of the risks which accompany child marriage, including those entailing limitations to education and livelihood opportunities. However, girls commonly experience greater risk because of the link between child marriage and early pregnancy and child-bearing, as well as through young brides' increased vulnerability to abuse in the marital household.

Child marriage has long been associated with early child-bearing and we see a similar statistical trend in the teenage birth rate as in rates of child marriage. The pregnancy rate among girls under 18 declined by 21 per cent between 1998 and 2006 according to Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data (Edilberto and Mengjia 2013), yet the number of women aged 20–24 who will have given birth before the age of 18 is projected to increase by 1 million between 2010 and 2030 (ibid.). Since pregnancy often follows marriage, it is the same girls who are at greatest risk of both. In 2005/6, rural girls were found to be twice as likely as urban girls to have given birth by 18 years old and, 'less educated young women, those belonging to the most economically disadvantaged households and those belonging to Scheduled Tribes [were] more likely than others to have given birth before they were 18 years of age' (Santhya and Jejeebhoy 2012: 10). Similarly, it is the girls who are least educated, poorest, from rural areas and from marginalised social groups who are most likely to get married by 18. The median age at marriage for girls from marginalised social groups was found to be two years earlier than for those belonging to other social groups – 16.5 among girls from the Scheduled Castes, 16.7 for those among Scheduled Tribes and 16.8 for those among Other Backward Classes,<sup>7</sup> as opposed to 18.7 among other, less marginalised groups – according to NFHS data from 2005/6 (UNICEF 2012).

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<sup>7</sup> This report uses the terms for caste defined by the Government of India. Scheduled Caste refers to various groups of people who have been historically disadvantaged and are seen as the lowest in the Indian caste structure, Other Backward Classes is a collective term for castes which are thought to be socially and educationally disadvantaged, and Other Castes refers to the remaining, traditionally less disadvantaged group of castes.

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### 3.3.2 State-level data

Before its bifurcation in 2014, Andhra Pradesh was the fifth-largest state in India and had a population of over 80 million (Singh and Vennam 2016). Census data from 2011 reveal substantial variance in rates of child marriage between states; the percentage of females 'effectively married' before 18 was at its lowest, at 0.3 per cent, in Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir, and at its highest, at 7.8 per cent, in West Bengal. United Andhra Pradesh had the ninth-highest number of people who were married as children in 2011, though the percentage of those effectively married before 18 was only marginally higher than the national average, at 4 per cent (Census of India 2011).

Table 2 shows the absolute numbers and the prevalence rates of child marriage in united Andhra Pradesh in 2011, it also demonstrates that the latter did not differ hugely from national rates.

**Table 2. National and state-level data for the prevalence of child marriage**

Age group	Currently married	Widowed	Separated	Divorced	Total ever-married	Total females	% ever-married
<b>India</b>							
10–14	1,709,811	63,647	32,246	6,496	1,812,200	63,290,377	2.9
15–18a	3,232,919	78,247	26,724	7,773	3,345,663	33,592,084	9.6
<b>Andhra Pradesh</b>							
10–14	95,912	4,472	1,752	310	102,446	3,992,711	2.6
15–18a	209,239	5,103	1,931	389	216,662	2,228,059	9.7

Notes: a Census 2011 data combine the respondents aged 17 years and 18 years in the same age group. Hence, a percentage of those married within the age groups 15–18 years and 10–18 years include those who were married after they completed 18 years of age (the legal age of marriage).

Source: Singh and Vennam (2016), compiled from Census 2011 data for united Andhra Pradesh.

Differences in prevalence between states are smaller in many cases than between urban and rural sites within the same state. NFHS-4 data from 2015/16 reports that in Andhra Pradesh, 32.7 per cent of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18, compared to 25.7 per cent in Telangana.<sup>8</sup> In Andhra Pradesh that equates to 26.3 per cent of girls in urban sites compared to 35.5 per cent in rural sites. In Telangana the gap is even wider – only 15.7 per cent of girls aged 20–24 were married before 18 in urban sites, compared to 35 per cent in rural sites (IIPS 2016a; IIPS 2016b). Table 3 shows these disparities, alongside similar trends observed in the figures for early child-bearing.

**Table 3. State-level data comparing the prevalence of child marriage in urban and rural areas of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana**

Indicator	State	Total	Urban	Rural
Women aged 20–24 years married before age 18 years (%)	Andhra Pradesh	32.7	26.3	35.5
	Telangana	25.7	15.7	35
Women aged 15–19 years who were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey (%)	Andhra Pradesh	11.8	8.8	13.2
	Telangana	10.6	6.5	13.8

Source: Compiled from NFHS-4 data (2015/16).

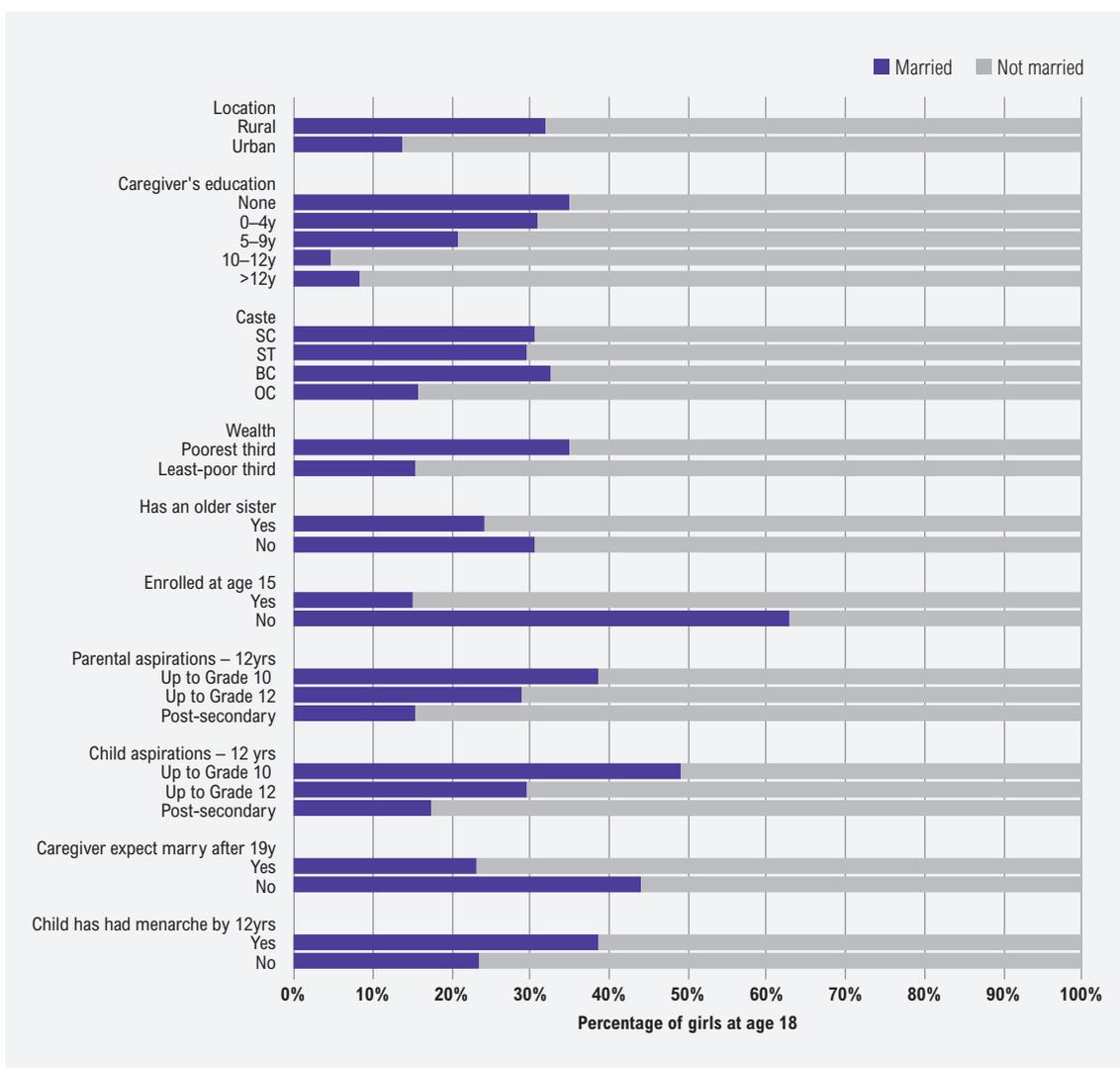
<sup>8</sup> Percentages from NFHS-4 data (2015/16) should not be compared directly to those above from Census 2011 data as the latter were collected in united Andhra Pradesh, while NFHS-4 data were collected after the bifurcation of the state. Moreover, different indicators were used for each survey.

# 4. Which girls are most at risk of child marriage and early child-bearing?

## 4.1 Child marriage

Before the age of 18, almost 28 per cent of girls in the Young Lives sample from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana were married and only 1 per cent of boys (equating to 136 girls and 5 boys). The graph below (Figure 2) shows the percentage of Young Lives girls from different social groups and backgrounds who were married below age 18, helping us to build a profile of the girls most likely to experience child marriage. The graph shows, for example, that 32 per cent of girls from rural areas (n=367) experienced child marriage compared to only 14 per cent of girls from urban areas (n=116). It has been produced using descriptive statistics, which can be viewed in full in Table A1 in the Appendix.

**Figure 2. Percentage of girls married below age 18, by location, caregiver education, caste, wealth tercile and caregiver and child aspirations at age 12**



Source: Young Lives data from Rounds 1 to 4.

At household level, the girls most at risk of marrying at a young age were from the *poorest groups* and were living in *rural locations*. Young Lives data showed that girls from *Other Backward Classes* were marginally more likely than girls from Scheduled Tribes and castes to experience child marriage, but were over twice as likely as those from the Other Castes (33 per cent vs 16 per cent).<sup>9</sup> There was also a strong association with *caregiver education*, so that 35 per cent of girls whose caregivers had had no education were married before they were 18, compared to only 5 per cent of those whose caregivers had been at school for 10–12 years.

At individual level, girls who remained unmarried by the age of 18 had attended (on average) *almost three more years of schooling* than those who were married. Moreover, only 15 per cent of girls still enrolled at 15 years old were married before the age of 18, in comparison to 63 per cent of those who had left school by the same age. Girls who were married before 18 also achieved *poorer scores in maths and Peabody Picture Vocabulary Tests* at both age 12 and age 15 than their unmarried peers.

*Parental and child aspirations* were associated with the likelihood of being married before 18. Girls whose caregivers' educational aspirations were low for them at age 12 were more likely to get married before 18 than those whose caregivers had higher aspirations. Thirty-nine per cent of girls whose parents aspired for them to reach only up to Grade 10 in school (the end of compulsory schooling) experienced child marriage, as opposed to 15 per cent of girls whose parents expected them to remain in education until at least post-secondary level. A similar trend was observed with children's own aspirations – girls with lower educational aspirations were more likely to marry earlier. *Caregivers' expectations for when their daughters would marry* was also important – girls whose caregivers expected them to marry before they were 19 were twice as likely to experience child marriage as girls whose caregivers expected them to marry after 19 years old (44 per cent vs. 23 per cent).

Regarding girls' *physical maturation*, those who had reached menarche by 11–12 years old (2006) were 15 per cent more likely to experience child marriage than girls who had not.

Young Lives has been able to look at the *household composition* for married and unmarried girls, finding that those who were married by the age of 18 tended to have a slightly higher average number of siblings. In addition, girls who had an older sister were around 6 per cent less likely to marry before age 18 than girls without one, and girls with an older brother were 14 per cent more likely to do so than those without.

## 4.2 Teenage marriage

Singh and Espinoza (2016) conducted regression analysis to determine which of the above factors bore the most powerful influence over the probability (i.e. are the most substantive predictors) of teenage marriage. A larger sample size of girls who married as teenagers (i.e. at the age of 19 or below) was used, instead of only girls married below the age of 18, to ensure that results from the regression were as robust as possible. The most influential factors were found to be the following:

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<sup>9</sup> Findings which show that coming from the Other Backward Classes is more predictive of teenage marriage than coming from more marginalised Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes may be explained by the overrepresentation of girls from Other Backward Classes within our sample as well as the multiple initiatives which target the latter castes for interventions, such as those that aim to improve their access to education.

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- school enrolment at the age of 15;
- parental and child aspirations for education at the ages of 12 and 15 (respectively) and parents' expectation of whether their daughter would marry before the age of 19;
- wealth and caregiver education;
- menarche (which affects parental expectations of age of marriage); and
- sibling composition.

Table 4 is a simplified version of the results of this regression analysis, displaying only those variables that had statistical significance. It highlights the changing impact of each variable (listed in the far left column) on the probability that a girl will marry by the age of 19 after other variables (added cumulatively and described across the top row) are accounted for<sup>10</sup>. Instead of values, '+' or '-' symbols have been used to show whether a variable increased or decreased the probability of teen marriage, and the number of symbols present represents the statistical significance of the result (see key). The figure shows, for example, that after all other variables were taken into account (column 6), enrolment at the age of 15 had the largest and most significant (negative) impact on the probability of teen marriage; it decreased its likelihood by 32.2 per cent (for full regression tables see Singh and Espinoza 2016).

In column 1 we see the influence of socio-economic background; coming from the least-poor third of households and having a caregiver educated for 10–12 years each reduced the probability of teen marriage (the former more so than the latter). Column 2 further accounts for sibling gender and age composition, as well as age of menarche; having an older brother and experiencing menarche by the age of 12 significantly increased the probability of teen marriage. Column 3 includes parental expectations that a girl will marry after the age of 19 (recorded when the girl was 12), and this reduced the probability of a girl actually marrying by then. Including these expectations within the regression also reduced the modelled impact of menarche, indicating that parental expectations for the age of their daughter's marriage are influenced by the experience of menarche, and it is through this channel that menarche affects the actual age of marriage. In column 4, parental and child aspirations for education (recorded when the girl was 12) are accounted for, and both showed 'significant predictive power for teenage marriage' (ibid.: 11).

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase 'after all other variables have been accounted for' (or similar) is used throughout the remainder of the report to indicate where evidence is based on regression analysis (rather than descriptive statistics). The term indicates the modelled effect associated with changing one variable, while the others remain constant.

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**Table 4. Predictors of teenage marriage**

VARIABLE	Regression results after accounting for...					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Wealth, caregiver education, caste, age, urban/rural location	& Household composition, menarche	& Parental expectation for age at marriage	& Parental and child aspirations for education	& Enrolment in education	& Location at mandal level
Least-poor third (in 2009)	---	---	---	--	-	
Caregiver educated for 10–12 years	--	--	--			
Has an older sister				-	--	-
Has an older brother		++	++		+	
Menarche by the age of 12		++	+	+		
Parents aspire to post-secondary education				-		
Child aspires to post-secondary education				--		
Parents expect child age of marriage >19y			---	-	-	
Enrolled in education at 15y					---	---

**Key**

Negative & significant	Positive & significant	Level of significance	Not significant
-	+	p<0.1	
--	++	p<0.05	
---	+++	p<0.01	

Once parental expectation for age of marriage and aspirations were included, the power of wealth and caregiver education as predictors of teenage marriage were diminished. This is suggestive that two of the channels through which wealth and caregiver education influence the probability of teenage marriage are how long parents expect their daughters to remain in school and when they expect them to marry. Including aspirations also reduced the influence of having an older brother, potentially due to effects of son preference (discussed in more depth below), whereby having an older son may result in parents having lower aspirations for (and investments in) a daughter (ibid.). Column 5 includes enrolment at the ages of 12 and 15, revealing that enrolment at 15 (i.e. in mid-adolescence) bore the strongest predictive power over teenage marriage compared to other variables. It also reduced the influence of both aspirations and wealth, indicating that one of the channels through which they influence teenage marriage is by affecting enrolment.

**4.3 Early child-bearing**

In the Young Lives sample, almost two-thirds (59 per cent) of married girls had given birth by 19 years old (102 girls) and all recorded births had happened in wedlock (Galab et al. 2014b). For many newly wed girls and young women, childbirth follows closely after marriage and so the descriptive characteristics of those who experienced early childbirth essentially mirror those of the girls who experienced child marriage. Moreover, regression analysis confirms that the predictors

of teenage fertility are largely the same as those for teenage marriage (Singh and Espinoza 2016), indicating that policies which seek to affect the former should also be targeting the latter.

Akin to those girls who had married below 18, the girls most likely to have had a child by 19 years old (as compared with all other married and unmarried girls) were from the *poorest groups*; were more likely to live in *rural areas*; had the *least educated mothers*; had earlier experiences of *menarche*; had *lower educational aspirations*; and were *less likely to be enrolled* in school at the ages of 12 and 15 (ibid.).

Crucially for policies that aim to affect early child-bearing specifically, there are, however, some small differences between the predictors for early child-bearing and those for teenage marriage. Table 5 shows the simplified results of a regression analysis demonstrating the impact of different variables on the probability that a girl will give birth by the age of 19 after other variables are progressively accounted for. As above, it only shows results for those variables that displayed statistical significance at some stage during the regression.

**Table 5. Predictors of early child-bearing**

VARIABLE		Regression results after accounting for...					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
		Wealth, caregiver education, caste, age, urban/rural location	& Household composition, menarche	& Parental expectation for age at marriage	& Parental and child aspirations for education	& Enrolment in education	& Location at mandal level
Caregiver education	5–9 years		–	– –			
	10–12 years	– – –	– – –	– –			
Caste	SC						+
	ST						+
	BC	++	++	++			
Has older sister(s)				– –	– –	– –	
Has older brother(s)			++	++	+	+	++
Menarche by the age of 12			+++	+++	++	+	+
Parents aspire to post-secondary education (recorded 12y)					–		
Child aspires to post-secondary education (recorded 12y)					–		
Enrolled in education at 15y						– – –	– – –

#### Key

Negative & significant	Positive & significant	Level of significance	Not significant
–	+	p<0.1	
– –	++	p<0.05	
– – –	+++	p<0.01	

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Wealth and parental expectation of the age at marriage, unlike the predictors for teenage marriage, played little predictive role regarding early child-bearing (hence neither is displayed in Table 5). However, caregiver education (above primary school level) was more significant as a predictor here than for teenage marriage, though it lost its influence again once aspirations were taken into account. After accounting for all other variables (column 6) the experience of menarche by age 12 maintained statistical significance, increasing the probability of early child-bearing by 10.6 per cent. Furthermore, caste bore greater influence over the probability of early child-bearing than that of teenage marriage; being from a Scheduled Tribe or Caste positively influenced the probability of early child-bearing and after all other variables had been accounted for, married girls from the Scheduled Tribes were 10.5 per cent more likely to give birth by the time they were 19 than married girls from the Other Castes (ibid.).

Similar patterns prevailed for early child-bearing to the ones for teenage marriage as regards the influence of parental and child aspirations for education as well as of enrolment in school at 12 and 15. The most substantive predictor for identifying which girls are at greatest risk of early child-bearing was found to be non-enrolment in school at the age of 15 and being enrolled at this age reduced the probability of early child-bearing by 21 per cent (after all other variables had been taken into account) (ibid.).

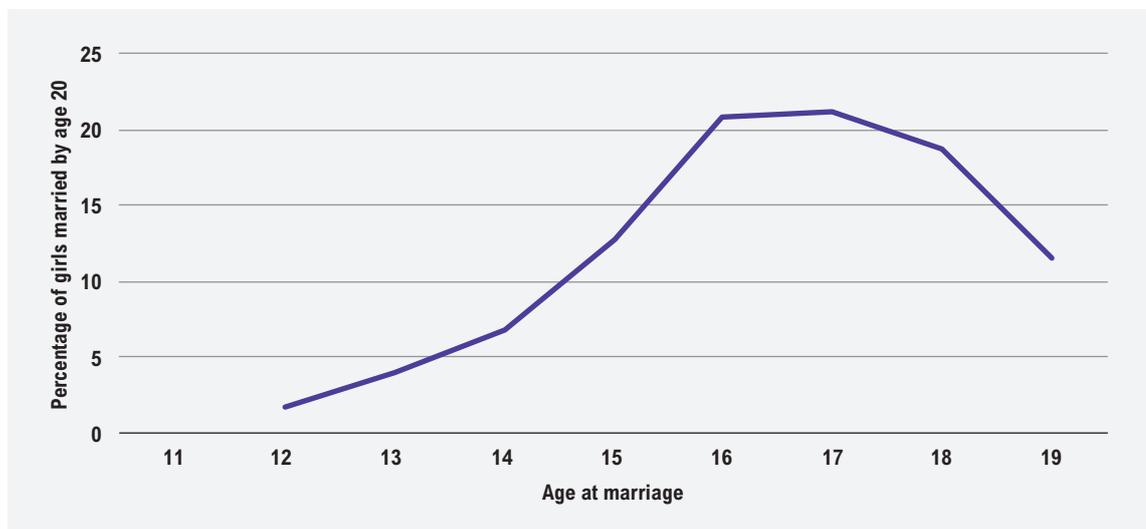
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## 5. When are they getting married and who are they marrying?

### 5.1 Age at marriage

Nationally representative datasets show that there was a decline in the percentages of girls getting married under the age of 16 as well as below 18 over the 20-year period 1992–2012. Within the Young Lives sample, the mean age at marriage among those girls married by 2013 (when they were 19) was 16.6 years old (Galab et al. 2014b), similar to nationally representative figures that show a mean age of marriage for girls married below 18 of 16.5 in 2011 (Census of India 2011).

**Figure 3. Percentage of girls married, by age of marriage**



Source: Young Lives survey data.

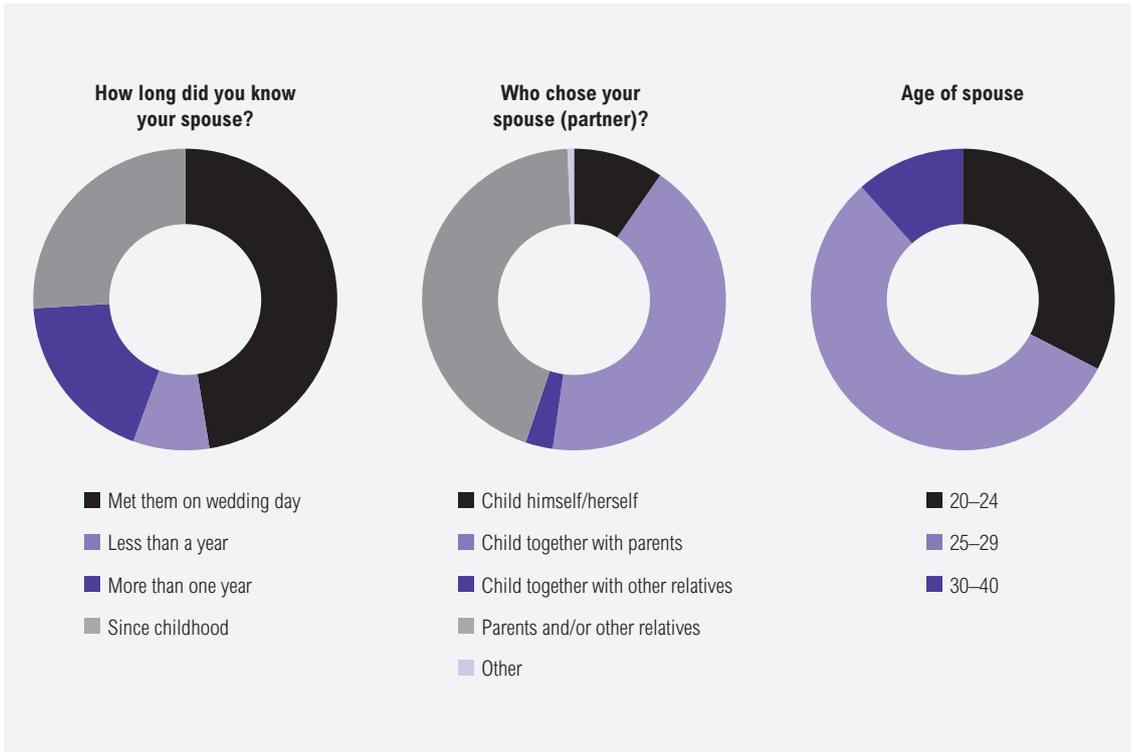
Figure 3 demonstrates the volume of marriages (the area under the graph) that took place amongst girls in the Young Lives sample by certain ages between 10 and 20 years old. This highlights that about 60 per cent of the girls in this age group had been married by the age of 17, but many girls were still marrying during early and middle adolescence; 5 per cent were married by age 13, 10 per cent by age 14 and 20 per cent by age 15.

### 5.2 Characteristics of partnership

Figure 4 shows the percentages of Young Lives girls who married before the age of 18 according to (1) how long they had known their partners before getting married; (2) how old their spouses were; and (3) who was involved in choosing the spouse. From the first chart we see that over 47 per cent of girls had not met their prospective husbands before their wedding day.

The second chart reveals that around 45 per cent of girls had no say in choosing their spouse. Only 10 per cent of the girls were able to choose themselves and 45 per cent made the decision together with their parents or other relatives. From these figures, it appears that many girls who experience child marriage have little influence over decisions regarding their marriage arrangements.

Figure 4. Spousal characteristics



Finally, the third chart shows that while the majority of girls were wedded to young men between 25 and 29 years old, 12 per cent were married to men between 30 and 40 years old. Large age differences between girls and their spouses can have profoundly detrimental effects on their ability to negotiate or take part in household decisions. Girls' relative powerlessness in marital relationships with older men can subsequently increase the likelihood that they experience domestic violence and abuse (ICRW 2007).

## 6. Why are they marrying?

This section draws on Young Lives evidence to explore the reasons behind child marriage and early child-bearing. It makes use of Singh and Espinoza's (2016) regression analysis, incorporating the predictors of teenage marriage as these are likely to bear strong similarity to those of child marriage. It should be noted however, that they may not be identical.

### 6.1 Aspirations

**Aspirations matter but reflect wider realities. Girls and caregivers' aspirations fall during adolescence as girls' lack of opportunities and vulnerability to gendered risks become more pronounced.**

Structural factors, such as poverty, inequitable access to the labour market and poor service provision, limit the kinds of opportunities available to girls and women. Gendered social norms regulate women's roles in society, restrict their sexuality and agency, and determine the importance of certain attributes for marriageability. Young Lives has found that gender norms become more salient once girls reach puberty and, in combination with their constrained opportunities and experiences, cause girls and caregivers to modify their plans and aspirations.

#### 6.1.1 Aspirations and opportunities

*EVIDENCE: Girls whose parents had the lowest educational aspirations for their daughters (when they were 12) were twice as likely to be married by the time they were 18 as those whose parents had the highest educational aspirations.*

Young Lives' evidence shows that caregivers' expectations for when girls will marry and caregiver and children's aspirations for education are powerful predictors of teenage marriage (Singh and Espinoza 2016). Regression analysis also shows that one of the channels through which poverty and caregiver education (discussed further below) bear influence on the probability of teen marriage is through their influence over these expectations and aspirations. This is consistent with wider research that indicates that aspirations are determined by 'external constraints' – household circumstances, social norms and structural factors – as well as by 'internal constraints' – people's beliefs and perceptions about their opportunities and capacities (Bernard, Dercon, and Taffesse 2011). These internal constraints are in turn influenced by people's experiences (ibid.). Thus, aspirations reflect and are responsive towards wider realities, rather than deriving from the innate characteristics of an individual. Young Lives evidence suggests that efforts to influence them would be best targeted at improving societal and household circumstances, rather than focusing on individual views.

In India, norms which define women's roles in terms of their relation to others – for example, as wife, daughter, daughter-in-law and mother – have been described as restricting girls 'from having aspirations beyond marriage' (Nirantar Trust 2015: 10). In fact, Young Lives data show that girls' and caregivers' educational aspirations start off high (Dornan and Pells 2014), but diminish over the early life-course as the realities of girls' gendered experiences – the challenges they face in obtaining a quality education and entering into paid employment – become more pronounced (Morrow 2013). When their daughters are 12, caregivers have lower aspirations for them than for their sons and these are reflected in the lower aspirations girls

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have for themselves by the age of 15 (Dercon and Singh 2013). There follows a similarly striking association between these aspirations and girls' poorer outcomes in cognitive achievement at the ages of 12 and, more significantly, 15. Child aspirations at the age of 15 then show a strongly significant relationship with gendered gaps in enrolment at that age (ibid.).

Aspirations decline during adolescence along lines of gender, caste and economic status (Morrow 2013). Gender disparities are not even within social groups – certain factors affect the size (or even presence) of gender disparities. Living in a rural location, for example, exacerbates the gender gap in favour of boys in terms of the educational aspirations of parents and children, while there is a 'lower incidence or (statistically significant) absence of a bias in urban areas' (Dercon and Singh 2013: 11). Caregiver education also substantially affects the presence of bias, with gaps in the educational aspirations of both parents and children (at 12 years old) disappearing for girls whose mothers are educated for 12 years or more (ibid.).

Last, Young Lives data demonstrate that children's aspirations, 'feed through into the child's sense of self-efficacy (agency) ... by age 15' (Dercon and Singh 2013: 17) in urban sites. In other words, 'parental aspirations matter ... for agency in India ... underlying how parents' hopes for children tend to translate into children's self-efficacy, their sense of being able to achieve what they hope for' (ibid.). Multiple reports have emphasised the importance of agency for helping girls 'to challenge gender norms within their family and community' to delay marriage and child-bearing (Jones et al. 2014: 52; see also ICRW 2011).

### 6.1.2 Gendered social risks

*EVIDENCE: Girls who had experienced menarche by age 12 were 1.7 times more likely to be married by age 18 than those who had not.*

Caregivers' concern for girls' welfare and well-being came through strongly within the qualitative data, often framed as dependent upon their achievement of a suitable marriage alliance. Caregivers feel duty-bound to secure a 'good match' for their daughters – someone with a job, someone educated, someone who "will take care of her and love her". Equally, they are concerned that unmarried girls may engage in pre-marital (sexual) relationships or may be exposed to sexual violence and harassment (Feeny and Crivello 2015; Pells 2011). Many see child marriage as a means to protect against these (and other) gendered social risks.

Biological maturity is a significant marker of social adulthood for girls in India,<sup>11</sup> since puberty heralds the start of girls' reproductive capacity. It is at this stage that gender norms, such as those regulating girls' sexual conduct, become more salient. The protection of girls' chastity and honour is critical for the maintenance of both their own and their families' status and reputation, and hence also for girls' marriageability (Boyden and Crivello 2011). Many caregivers see delaying marriage – i.e. prolonging the time between puberty and marriage - as exacerbating the risk that girls may contravene or deviate from these norms (Feeny and Crivello 2015). From puberty onwards, girls' behaviour is watched by both their families and members of the wider community, with any transgression from the norms around modesty – being seen texting too often on a mobile phone for example – potentially putting 'whole families in moral and social jeopardy' (Boyden and Crivello 2011: 176). This may explain why Young Lives evidence shows that the age of menarche affects parents' expectations for when their daughters will marry; regression analysis shows that an earlier experience of menarche increases the probability of

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<sup>11</sup> In contrast, boys have to prove that they are mature enough to be regarded as adults, to marry and to reproduce, by earning and contributing economically to the household.

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teen marriage (Singh and Espinoza 2016) as parents seek to reduce the time their daughters remain unmarried (and therefore exposed to risk) after puberty.

Young Lives' data reveal that norms surrounding the importance of girls' reputations often combine with their perceived and real vulnerability to (sexual) violence, intensifying caregivers' anxiety to see their daughters established in (what is considered to be) the relative safety of marriage. Without being asked specifically about experiences of violence, Young Lives girls reported high incidence of eve-teasing and other studies report that girls are vulnerable to, 'verbal harassment and unwanted touch ... described as taking place typically when girls were conducting necessary day-to-day activities, such as going to or returning from school, fetching water, shopping at the market or working in the fields' (Jejeebhoy et al. 2013: 26). These risks lead some caregivers to restrict girls' mobility once they reach puberty, so that they are no longer permitted the freedom to play in public spaces with other children and some may even be withdrawn from school (Boyden and Crivello 2011). In this context, child marriage therefore becomes an opportunity for caregivers to provide for their daughter's moral and physical safety, as well as to ensure the protection of the family's honour.

### 6.1.3 Changing social norms and competing risks

*"Girls should study, madam. Because after a girl gets married, her husband may say that she doesn't do household work nor is she educated and abuse her and beat her."*

(Shanmuka Priya, a 13-year-old girl from a poor mandal in southern Telangana)

Social norms that determine which attributes contribute to or detract from girls' 'marriageability' strongly influence the kinds of roles, responsibilities and activities girls typically undertake. Young Lives' findings indicate that some of these norms may be changing in response to wider societal factors, which is affecting the types of gendered social risk girls are exposed to.

Boys have conventionally desired wives who are less educated than them, with norms suggesting less educated girls will be more pliant and submissive to the will of their husbands. Consequently, in a context where girls' well-being is often seen as dependent upon securing a successful marriage alliance, their continued enrolment in school has frequently been a low priority for parents. Moreover, it has traditionally been crucial for girls to learn certain skills – related to both domestic tasks and agricultural work – in order to improve their marriageability as well as to mitigate against the very real risk of being poorly treated (physically and/or emotionally abused) by future in-laws, should they be unable to perform the tasks expected of a daughter-in-law and wife (Hardgrove et al. 2014; Morrow 2013; Morrow and Singh forthcoming). Many caregivers see time spent in school as inhibiting the development of these skills.

Changes in societal contexts affect these norms. Rising access to education and skilled employment opportunities, for example, have elongated the time both boys and girls spend enrolled in school, and appear to have also affected the types of attribute seen as important for marriageability. Educated girls were described by some Young Lives' caregivers as more likely to contract a successful alliance than their less educated peers – measured in terms of the affluence, education and employment prospects of their spouse, as well as in terms of the spouse's character and propensity to treat their wife with love and respect.

However, with these changes come new challenges and young people and caregivers can find themselves facing diverse, often competing forms of risk. Many parents 'fear that increasing opportunities for girls and young women to study ... may put them at greater risk of acquiring a 'bad name' or becoming unmarriageable' (Hardgrove et al. 2014: 25). For instance, caregivers

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are concerned that ‘others may doubt the reputation of their daughters if they have spent time away from home studying in towns or boarding in hostels, because of the potential for interaction with boys, which may reduce their marriage prospects’ (Pells 2011: 14). Caregivers are forced to choose the path of least risk to their daughters’ future well-being, a decision which is influenced by the above considerations, as well as by other societal factors, such as the accessibility and safety of the school and its environment, or the existence (and parents’ awareness) of future employment opportunities which might justify further investments in girls’ education.

#### **6.1.4 Age-related norms and limited decision-making power**

*EVIDENCE: After accounting for other variables, girls whose parents expected them to get married after the age of 19 were 8.7 per cent less likely to experience teenage marriage than those whose parents expected them to marry before they were 19.*

Familial relationships are framed by strong patriarchal and age-related norms so that, while both boys and girls are increasingly desirous of delaying their marriages, this desire is countered by the deference they feel for their parents’ wishes. Young Lives data show that young people in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana increasingly want to complete their education and obtain a job before starting a family (Dornan and Pells 2014) – and this desire comes out strongly for both boys and girls (though predominantly for boys). However, the majority of Young Lives boys and girls also described their limited decision-making power and lack of agency in choosing when or who to marry.

Several Young Lives girls were aware of changing social norms around them, speaking of instances where girls had been able to choose their own spouses and to spend longer in education and in the pursuit of securing skilled, paid employment. A small number demonstrated having some decision-making power or feeling agency within their family regarding their own marriages. As Tejaswini, a Younger Cohort girl (then 14 years old) from the Other Backward Classes living in a village of southern Telangana said, “[T]his is my marriage. What can they do if I say no?” A few caregivers also appeared to be listening to their daughters’ (and sons’) opinions and were encouraging them to make choices regarding the timing of marriage and selection of partner.

Nevertheless, arranged marriages ‘wherein youth do not have a “real decision” in spouse selection’ nor about the timing of marriage, are still the norm across most communities in India (Singh and Vennam 2016: 2). Young Lives data show that parental expectations for the age their children will marry is a powerful predictor for their actual age of marriage; regression analysis showed that, after accounting for other variables, girls whose parents had expected them to get married after age 19 were 8.7 per cent less likely to experience teen marriage than those whose parents expected them to marry before 19. Moreover, only 10 per cent of Young Lives girls who married before 18 years old said that they chose their own spouse, and 44 per cent had no input into the decision at all.

It is not only in marital decisions that young people experience limited agency and their unfamiliarity with decision-making in general may explain the reluctance many showed to oppose parental decisions regarding marriage. Some young people were wary of influencing a decision that bore such importance for their future well-being, particularly when they perceived themselves to be less qualified than their parents to make an informed choice. Their limited decision-making power means that while girls may be at greater risk of contracting a marriage earlier than they are ready for, boys may also be married at a time and to a spouse not of their choosing.

### 6.1.5 Sibling composition and birth order

*EVIDENCE: After accounting for other variables, girls with an older sister were 11 per cent less likely to marry by age 19 than those others who were the eldest daughters in their household.*

Young Lives data provide 'strong evidence' that sibling gender composition does impact on the probability of marriage by 19 years old. Regression analysis shows that girls with an older sister are 11 per cent less likely to get married by 19 while girls with older brothers are 5 per cent more likely to be married by the same age (Singh and Espinoza 2016). Birth order alone does not appear to be significant for the probability of marriage from Young Lives' analysis; sibling composition also matters (Singh and Vennam 2016).

There exist strong social norms regulating the order in which older and younger sisters are married. Older daughters are traditionally married before their younger sisters and, in some communities, daughters should be married prior to sons of a similar age. Effectively, this means that there is often a higher probability that a girl will be married early if she is the eldest daughter in a family, as opposed to a girl of the same age but who has an older sister (Singh and Espinoza 2016).

Having an older sister remained significant once other variables had been accounted for by regression analysis. However, once parental and child aspirations were taken into account, the influence of having an older brother on the probability of marrying by 19 became statistically insignificant. This is suggestive that the positive correlation between having an older brother and teen marriage may be a consequence of parents' lower aspirations for their daughters than for their sons, and subsequent lower investments in girls (ibid.). Moreover, as will be discussed further below, in the context of poverty, gender norms interact with other household factors so that parents are sometimes constrained in their options and consequently make choices that disadvantage one child over another. This is why the size and gender composition of the sibling group, together with birth order, can lead to disparities between different children within families.

## 6.2 Poverty

**Poverty is a risk factor. Where resources are limited, gendered social risks become more acute and opportunities more constrained, forcing parents to make decisions which disadvantage girls.**

Young Lives has substantial data demonstrating the negative impact of inequalities in the early years of life – poverty, rurality, coming from more marginalised castes and having caregivers with the lowest education levels – on children's later outcomes (Dornan and Pells 2015). Young Lives concludes that the socio-economic background of young women bears an important influence on the probability of teenage marriage (Singh and Espinoza 2016), with regression analysis showing a correlation between wealth and caregiver education and the likelihood of teen marriage. Young Lives data provide evidence that, in circumstances where resources are restricted, gendered social risks become more acute and opportunities more constrained. Caregivers are then forced to make difficult decisions about how to mitigate such risks and about how to invest in their children, guided by perceptions of girls' future prospects (Feeny and Crivello 2015; Pells 2011).

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### 6.2.1 Poverty exacerbates gendered risks

*EVIDENCE: After all other variables were taken into account, girls from the least-poor tercile were 8 per cent less likely to be married than girls from the poorest tercile.*

Gendered social risks are often compounded by poverty and social disadvantage, leaving girls and their caregivers few alternatives to child marriage. Paid employment opportunities for young women are limited and usually they are prescribed more caring and household responsibilities, rather than encouraged to pursue wage-earning activities like their male peers. Under these circumstances, marriage offers a means by which caregivers can provide financial security for their daughters into adulthood (ibid.). This becomes particularly important in the poorest households and those where caregivers may be older or have poor health – those that are least able to support their daughters financially in the long term. As one Young Lives mother explained, parents are often gravely concerned for their daughters' future welfare, and are thus motivated to arrange a marriage alliance as soon as possible: "They say 'There is no guarantee that we live long, so it is better to marry them off.' They say that all the time."

### 6.2.2 Son preference

*"We need the help of the elder son ... we should provide for his studies as he has to look after us."*

Numerous studies have found that social norms which position girls as '*paraya dhan*' (the financial asset of a future marital family) and as destined for reproductive, caring and household roles, leave caregivers with little incentive to educate their daughters (beyond the minimum) or to delay their marriage (Dasra 2015; ICRW 2013). These cultural values, which typically favour boys, encourage parents to invest more in their sons' education than in that of their daughters. Young Lives data add that it is where resources are most limited that parents are forced to make such decisions regarding how they invest in their children, and these decisions reflect gendered social norms and structural factors that limit girls' future opportunities (Feeny and Crivello 2015; Pells 2011).

Indian phrases such as 'bringing up a daughter is like watering a plant in another's courtyard' (Crivello et al. 2014: 109) help to illuminate some of the social norms that drive many parents to have higher educational aspirations for their sons than their daughters and to invest more in boys' education than in that of girls. Gendered social norms ascribe different roles and duties to boys and girls and traditionally it is sons who look after their parents into old age, while it is the 'destiny' of daughters to marry and move to the homes of their in-laws, where they perform a range of household, caring and sometimes unpaid labour tasks (Feeny and Crivello 2015). Hence, in impoverished circumstances, it is believed to be more necessary to invest in a son rather than in a daughter.

Young Lives provides evidence of an 'institutionalised' gender bias against girls in education in India (Dercon and Singh 2013: 2), confirming findings from other sources that greater parity in enrolment between girls and boys (particularly at primary level) has been accompanied by increased gender gaps in private school enrolment and investment in girls' and boys' education (Boyden et al. 2015). Young Lives' data reveal that impoverished parents invest are more likely to send their sons to fee-paying private schools than their daughters (who more commonly attend government schools). Private schools are perceived to be higher status than government schools and offer English as the medium of instruction – thought to offer an advantage in the labour market. This is particularly pertinent in the context of child marriage,

where girls with poorer educational outcomes and those whose parents invest less in their education are more likely to marry as teenagers (Singh and Espinoza 2016).

### **6.2.3 Poverty and marriage practices**

A recent landscape analysis conducted by the Nirantar Trust in India discusses the 'economics of marriage', describing how, 'norms around marriage transactions are governed by, and reproduce, inequalities' (Nirantar Trust 2015: 10). Consistent with other studies, it finds that patriarchal structures embedded within Indian society position women as economically burdensome and undervalue young women's labour, so that their families have limited bargaining power within marriage transactions. The dowry expected from parents as a consequence of these patriarchal norms can be problematic for impoverished families and so, according to the report, decisions about girls' marriages can be motivated by a desire to minimise the associated costs (Nirantar Trust 2015).

Young Lives data show that customs and practices around dowry differ between sites. The practice is often cited as a key driver of child marriage and, indeed, Young Lives has found instances where girls from poorer families are said to have been married younger because of the smaller dowry required for younger brides (Singh and Vennam 2016). However, the cost of the wedding ceremony itself may sometimes pose a more critical financial burden for families than the dowry (ICRW 2011) and Young Lives found instances where siblings were married at the same time in order to alleviate these costs. Some girls and boys even described needing to wait until their families were more financially secure before being able to afford dowry or other costs associated with a wedding, and thus their marriages were delayed by these practices. Qualitative interviews have shown that the debt incurred through the marriage of older siblings can also delay the marriage of younger daughters, as parents find themselves unable to meet the financial requirements until a later stage (Singh and Vennam 2016).

Taking on debt in order to pay for weddings appeared to be usual behaviour within our pro-poor sample. One caregiver explained how important it was for the family to buy gifts for each of the ceremonies they attend inside their community and among their wider social network. She told of the financial burden that social requirements placed upon the family, yet their reputation would be damaged should they fail to adhere to these community norms. Caregivers who are not seen to be spending enough on wedding ceremonies, or performing the required rituals and offerings, risk the censure of their neighbours, families and friends. Unfortunately, the debt families incur through their children's (and other) marriages may in itself exacerbate the poverty and social disadvantage that contribute to other risks associated with child marriage, such as increased demands on children's time for work and subsequent poorer educational outcomes.

### **6.2.4 Child work**

There is some evidence from Young Lives qualitative data that child work may in itself increase the risk of child marriage, and not only as a contributory factor to poorer educational outcomes (discussed below). Of those girls who left school early without immediate plans to marry, many were expected to undertake a rigorous work schedule, particularly in the poorest families. Many girls who are unmarried and post-pubescent also have their mobility restricted and may have few alternatives to working unpaid (or paid) for the family. Some girls desire relief from this work and see marriage as an opportunity for escape.

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Bhavana, a Hindu girl (21 years old) living in a poor, rural area in Rayalaseema, had left school before completing her primary education and engaged in work from a young age. After leaving school, she was expected to work every day, including by carrying out hard labour on the roads of Mumbai. Bhavana and her mother thought that marriage might offer her an opportunity to escape from her life of 'drudgery', and what little agency she had over decisions regarding her future, she channelled into developing the skills that would improve her marriage prospects – hoping to marry early in order to break away from her current circumstances (Crivello et al. 2014). Sadly, having married at the age of 16 at the behest of her brother (with no say in the decision herself), Bhavana continued doing daily wage labour but also became responsible for performing the housework for her in-laws. She describes her life after getting married: "Wherever I am, it is the same ... it was better as long as I was in my parental place ... there is more work here [marital home]. ... I cannot open my mouth ... [I] have to work continuously" (Singh and Vennam 2016: 19).

### 6.3 School enrolment

**Analysis shows that school enrolment at 15 years old is the most powerful predictor of child marriage.**

*EVIDENCE: After other variables had been accounted for, girls who were enrolled in school at the age of 15 were 32 per cent less likely to experience teen marriage than those who had already left school by that age.*

Multiple studies have found a correlation between the number of years of schooling a girl receives and the age at which she marries – the longer she is in education the later she marries (ICRW 2013). Young Lives data provide strong statistical evidence in support of this finding and regression analysis revealed that not being enrolled during mid-adolescence (measured at age 15) was 'quantitatively the most important single predictor of teenage marriage' of a girl (Singh and Espinoza 2016: 11). Crucially for policy interventions, dropping out of school earlier than age 15 did not increase the likelihood of being married by 19, indicating that focusing on keeping girls in education during secondary school is of equal importance to ensuring that they complete primary school, as regards the risk of marrying young.

Despite the significant *predictive* power of enrolment on teenage marriage, these findings cannot be interpreted as providing evidence of a causal relationship between leaving school early and getting married early. Young people leave school for diverse reasons, and the relationship between leaving school and getting married early has yet to be fully defined. Nevertheless, Young Lives girls who remained in school for longer did tend to marry later, so it is important to explore the timing of and the reasons behind girls' early school exit.

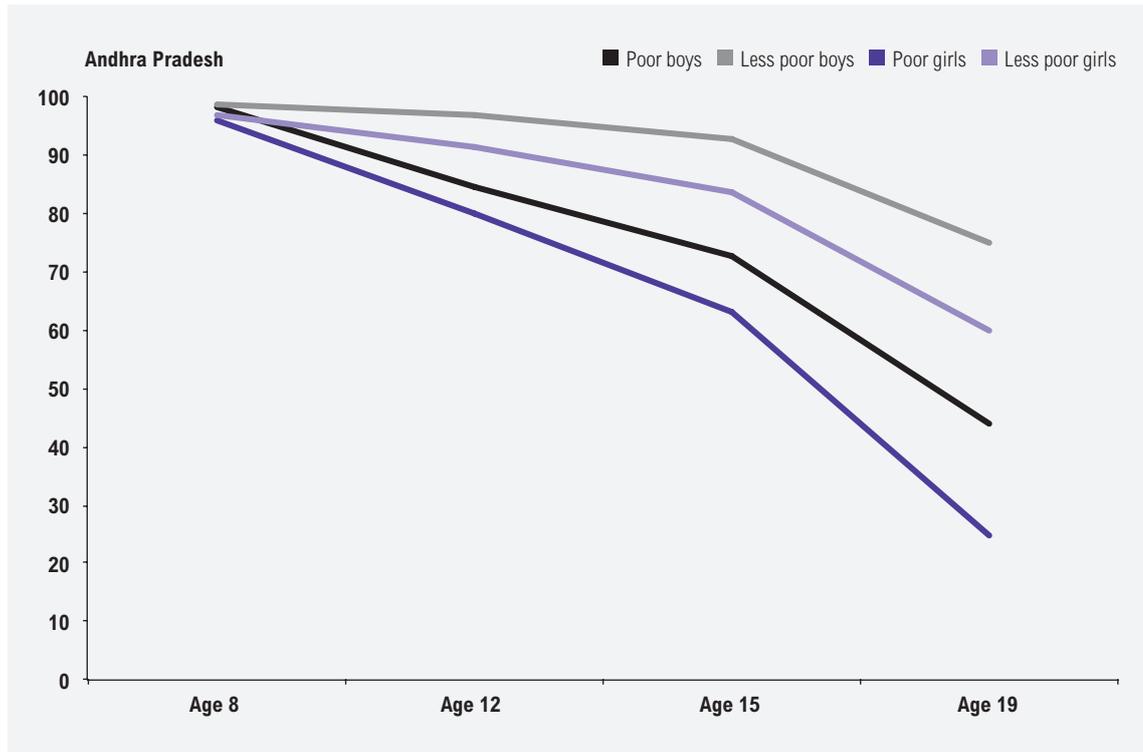
#### 6.3.1 Gender gaps in enrolment during adolescence

*EVIDENCE: Girls were 7 per cent more likely to have left school by 15 than boys.*  
(Galab et al. 2011)

Gender gaps in enrolment grow over the life-course, particularly where 'gender differences interact with other forms of disadvantage' (Banati et al. 2015: 4). While at the age of 8 there is little difference in enrolment between girls and boys, from then onwards gender gaps increase so that by 15, boys are far more likely than girls to be enrolled in school (Dornan

and Woodhead 2015). Figure 5 highlights that disparities also exist along lines of poverty and social disadvantage, so that the poorest children experience the greatest fall in enrolment, with the poorest girls faring worst overall. Gender gaps in enrolment widen during adolescence in particular, as poverty and early disadvantage intersect with the differing social expectations, opportunities, responsibilities and risks boys and girls are exposed to at this time. Those girls with the poorest learning outcomes and earliest school exit are subsequently found to be at greatest risk of child marriage.

**Figure 5. Gaps in school enrolment in Andhra Pradesh, by gender and wealth**



Source: Banati et al. (2015)

### 6.3.2 Inequitable access to quality schooling for girls

*EVIDENCE: Gaps in private school enrolment are widening between boys and girls; in 2006, boys age 12 were 7 per cent more likely to attend private school than girls – this gap increased to 13 per cent between boys and girls age 12 in 2013.*

(Galab et al. 2014a)

The rise in access to schooling across India has led to increased parity of enrolment between girls and boys. However, as noted above, this has been accompanied by increased inequity in access to fee-paying, private schools between genders. Private schools are ‘associated with aspirations for higher social status and improved opportunities for future employment’ (Woodhead et al. 2013: 4) and in the context of limited resources, families are more likely to send their sons to private schools than their daughters. Parents’ decisions about investment in their children’s education, including their ability or willingness to ‘reallocate scarce household resources away from other areas to ... private education’, are determined by diverse factors, including ‘gender norms, wealth, parental education levels and aspirations, as well as sibling age and gender and birth order of child’ (Woodhead et al. 2013: 26).

Young Lives data suggest that the growing private-school system poses a threat to equity in education, with 'children from rural areas, lower socio-economic backgrounds and girls [continuing] to be under represented in private schools' (Woodhead et al. 2013: 2). There is some evidence to suggest the standard of education offered by private schools may not be consistently better than that offered by government schools (Dornan and Pells 2014), and quality is often low in both, however, private schools are 'usually found to be associated with higher pupil test scores' (ibid.: 4). A large part of this may be due to the schools having a more advantaged intake over government schools, rather than the action of schools themselves. Test scores monitored by Young Lives fell (among the same age group) between 2006 and 2013 across both government and private school, but the worst declines were among the poorest students attending government schools (Dornan and Pells 2014). These findings are important for child marriage since data indicate that children who perform worse in school are more likely to leave school earlier. Young Lives found that 'a considerably higher percentage of children in the lowest achievement quartile [in mathematics] at age 12 had dropped out by age 15' (Rolleston 2014). Indeed 26 per cent of children who achieved the lowest scores in maths tests at age 12 dropped out before age 15 compared to only 11 per cent of those who scored highest (ibid).

### 6.3.3 Exclusionary/unsafe school environments

Young Lives has found that the quality of the school environment also influences educational outcomes inequitably for girls, and particularly those from poor, socially disadvantaged backgrounds. A lack of female teachers and limited availability of appropriate toilet facilities have been found to impact negatively on Young Lives girls' experiences of school, as can exposure to sexual harassment either on school premises or on girls' journeys to school (Dornan and Woodhead 2015; Feeny and Crivello 2015). Societal contexts such as inequitable access for rural children to higher education institutions can mean parents and children are forced to weigh up the risk to girls' safety of commuting (or migrating to urban centres to live in hostels) against the risk to their future well-being of leaving school early (Dornan and Woodhead 2015). As described earlier, as girls grow older, the importance of 'social reputation' increases and where girls' mobility has traditionally been restricted post puberty, caregivers are uneasy about exposing their daughters to the risk of (sexual) violence, particularly when recognition that schooling 'may not be life changing' appears to grow through adolescence' (ibid.: 43).

In response to the inequitable distribution of schooling facilities, the Government has established residential schools and provides boarding facilities in government hostels for Scheduled Tribe children and other groups from remote areas of united Andhra Pradesh (Boyden 2013). While problematic in some ways, these initiatives enable girls (often from the same villages) to live together with food and healthcare provided for them for free. For many girls, this can be a liberating experience while for parents it may offer some reassurance about the safety of their daughters when studying away from home.

### 6.3.4 Competing demands on time

*EVIDENCE: The more educated the women in the household are relative to men, the less children work.*

Families are often reliant upon 'intergenerational mutuality ... to protect against both social risk and hardship' (Boyden and Crivello 2011: 178), and children are expected to share the

burden of family risk and difficulties (ibid.). Social norms, as well as care responsibilities, increase the chances of young women leaving school early (Dornan and Pells 2014) and this is compounded by poverty and social disadvantage. In 2009, 30 per cent of Young Lives 15/16 year old girls had left school in order to work – domestic, agricultural or paid work – compared to 26 per cent of boys (Morrow 2012).

Other studies have similarly found that girls' work-related responsibilities within the home can significantly inhibit their continued enrolment in school. One study in Himachel Pradesh reports that 58 per cent of parents stated household chores as the main reason for stopping their daughters attending school, and 24 per cent said it was because it was the right time to start training their daughters to perform household chores (Sharma, Sharma, and Nagar 2007).

Young Lives data highlights that girls from poorer families are more likely to work longer hours than their least-poor peers and poorer families are more vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks, which have been found to increase still further the burden of work placed on children. There are limited economic opportunities available for most girls and, as we have seen, parental aspirations are gendered to girls' disadvantage from a young age. Consequently, girls (and poorer girls in particular) tend to report having greater demands on their time relating to work outside of school than boys. Added to this is awareness among caregivers of the risks to girls' marriageability and later well-being of not being practised in domestic chores and other skills traditionally expected of wives and daughters-in-law. These factors mean that girls often struggle with competing demands for their time, with negative repercussions on their experience of school.

The level of mothers' education appears to affect the amount of work done by children. This is thought to result from their increased bargaining power, the effect of which is illustrated by mothers' participation in the MGNREGS. This scheme requires the payment of equal wages to female and male participants and has been 'associated with an increase in the school attendance and grade attainment of their children, particularly daughters and children from the poorest families' (Pells and Woodhead 2014: 30). This impact has been attributed to women's greater involvement in household decision-making and improved bargaining power as a consequence of their increased economic contribution to the household (ibid.).

## 6.4 First pregnancy

**Social norms that encourage early child-bearing are compounded by inequitable access to health and education services, causing some married girls to give birth earlier than others.**

*"They will call us a barren woman if we don't conceive soon."*

(Young mother from Katur, a poor rural mandal in the Rayalaseema region)

Young Lives data highlight that the most powerful influence over early child-bearing is getting married early. Moreover, regression analysis showed that the drivers of teen marriage were largely synonymous with those of early child-bearing, particularly with regard to enrolment at the age of 15. However, as outlined above, there were some small differences in the extent to which certain factors influenced the probability of early child-bearing compared to teen marriage. These included the following:

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- Caste: Girls from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes were on average 10 per cent more likely (after accounting for other variables) to give birth early than girls from the Other Castes;
- Wealth: This played little role in determining whether a girl became pregnant by 19 years old;
- Caregiver education (above primary school level): This reduced the probability of early child-bearing more than the probability of teenage marriage, though it lost significance once aspirations were taken into account.

Young Lives has also found that newly wed couples often experience pressure from their communities to prove their fertility by conceiving quickly. These norms are further compounded by inequitable access to sexual and reproductive health services and information, meaning that young people have limited means by which to delay the timing of first pregnancy and lack knowledge of why and how they should do so. These findings reinforce the important role early disadvantage (e.g. coming from marginalised social groups) can play in determining poorer outcomes for girls later on in life, particularly when combined with gendered social norms and structural limitations (e.g. poor service provision).

#### 6.4.1 Social norms that encourage early childbirth

In addition to the diverse impacts of social norms on the timing of marriage as discussed above, there were some indications that they also influenced the timing of a woman's first child. In a focus group for young mothers held in a poor rural mandal in Rayalaseema region, for example, one young woman emphasised the importance of giving birth soon after getting married for one's status and reputation within the community. She explained how demonstrating fertility early on in this way was crucial, as

*“if it is even a bit late then they [the community] will take you to task ... if we don't have a child immediately then people look down upon that ... if the first child is born immediately after marriage then it is for our own good. If we don't conceive immediately then they will comment on us and keep taunting us. They will say, ‘Look she has no children’ and in this way a finger will be pointed at us.”*

She went on to explain that it was the society as a whole that said these things, including everyone in her village. As a consequence of these norms, her husband was keen for her to conceive as soon as possible once they were married: “[H]e said ‘The earlier the better. We must have kids very early and that will be good for us.’”

#### 6.4.2 Limited access to sexual and reproductive health services and information

Multiple studies identify the improvement in health services and information as critical for ‘enabling young people to make informed choices about reproduction/reproductive health’ (Dornan and Pells 2014: 17). On the positive side, Young Lives has found that alongside young people's increasing exposure to information about reproductive health (as a result of the rise in education), ‘both girls and their caregivers report that it is becoming more socially acceptable to get married later and delay childbirth, for economic and health reasons’ (Feeny and Crivello 2015: 4). Nevertheless, the testimonies of Young Lives mothers who had given birth early highlighted that lack of knowledge regarding sexual and reproductive health and limited access to related services are still a significant problem for many newly wed girls and young women (and boys and young men).

Latha, a Hindu girl from the Other Backward Classes living in a poor urban area of Rayalaseema, who got married at 20, and Ameena, a Muslim girl from the Other Castes living

in Hyderabad, who married at 16, both spoke of their ignorance of what to expect following their marriages and both became pregnant swiftly after marrying. After eloping, Preethi, who came from a Scheduled Tribe and lived in a mandal on the northern coast of Andhra Pradesh, was encouraged by her husband to resume her studies and she continued to attend college at his expense. However, she became pregnant within six months of getting married and explained to Young Lives that she and her husband had not discussed 'when' they were going to have children and she had not known at that time even how to tell if she was pregnant. She left college towards the end of her pregnancy (in the seventh month) and intends to return once the baby is three months old, though her mother is highly sceptical of whether she will be able to do so, bearing in mind her responsibilities as a wife and daughter-in-law:

*'I am thinking that she cannot do it. I told her if she didn't have her daughter she might have continued her studies, but now as she has a daughter she cannot study any more and she must take care of her family and her house. I said that we will take care of your daughter but if she asks for her mother in happiness or in sadness, we cannot give her your love. When she misses you we cannot do anything. Studying is possible only before the birth of a baby. Once you have the baby it is impossible to continue studies. We told her that we cannot take that responsibility and it is her husband's and her responsibility to take care of her baby.'*

Girls and young women spoke of having limited knowledge regarding sexual and reproductive health, having had minimal input from either school or family on the matter. Unmarried boys and young men appeared no better informed than their female peers, which indicates that both may struggle to make informed choices about, and plan for, the timing of their first child.

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## 7. Conclusion

This report has sought to answer two main research questions:

1. Which girls are most at risk of marrying and giving birth early?
2. What prevents girls from marrying and giving birth early?

In answer to the first, Young Lives descriptive statistics revealed that girls who married below the age of 18 were more likely to be from poorer backgrounds, from the Other Backward Classes (child marriage) and from rural areas, while girls who bore children early were more likely to be from the Scheduled Tribes. Girls who married as children were less likely to have been enrolled in secondary school when they were 12 years old. By 15 years old, only 40 per cent of the girls who experienced child marriage were still in school, compared to 86 per cent of the girls who were still unmarried when they were 18. Moreover, girls who delayed marriage beyond the age of 18 had scored consistently higher in maths and Peabody Picture Vocabulary Tests at 12 and 15 years old than their married peers. Both child and parental aspirations for education had been lower for girls who were married by 18, and their parents had also expected them to be married by a younger age.

In answering the second question, Young Lives provided evidence for the following:

Societal factors, including political economy and gendered social norms constrain girls' opportunities, experiences, choices and aspirations. These pressures and constraints become more salient during adolescence, causing girls and caregivers to adjust their plans. Gender norms around marriageability and social risk, for instance, leave parents feeling duty-bound to get their daughters married soon after menarche, as a protective measure. Equally, gender norms that determine women's role in society, as well as the limited job market opportunities available for women, cause children and parents' aspirations to diminish over the early life-course as the realities of girls' situations become more evident.

Second, where household resources are limited, parents are forced to make difficult decisions about how to invest in their children and are influenced by the discriminatory social norms and societal factors that limit girls' future prospects. An institutionalised gender bias is observable in education, for example, where norms that position daughters as the 'assets' of their future in-laws lead poor parents to invest more in boys' education than in that of girls. Poverty also motivates parents to seek earlier opportunities to provide for their daughters financially through marriage and may compel them to marry younger girls at the same time as older siblings in order to reduce the costs associated with weddings.

Third, our analysis shows that school enrolment in mid-adolescence is the most powerful predictor of teenage marriage. We only have school enrolment data at 12 and 15, but it is likely that enrolment in later adolescence would also have been very predictive. Gaps in enrolment widen during adolescence along lines of gender, poverty and social disadvantage so that the poorest girls experience the worst educational outcomes and leave school the earliest. These disparities are the result of inequitable investment in girls' education, poor or unsafe school environments, and competing demands on girls' time due to their gendered role in society. Policies which seek to keep girls in school are likely to protect them from child marriage.

Fourth, childbirth follows closely after marriage and the most powerful influence on early child-bearing is child marriage. However, some married girls are at greater risk of early child-bearing than others and Young Lives evidence shows that, while wealth did not bear much influence, caste was a more significant predictor of teenage fertility than of teenage marriage. Qualitative data also revealed that social norms which pressure girls (and boys) to give birth early are compounded by young people's limited access to sexual and reproductive health services.

## 8. Policy implications

From the above we can see that processes which operate at the more remote, societal level (i.e. structural factors and social norms) interact with more immediate factors, such as household contexts and girls' individual development, agency and identity, to affect girls' realities – their access to opportunities and the risks they face. It is therefore important that policy measures seek to address both development for adolescent girls and the development of society, as well as take into account that different factors bear influence at different stages in the life course. The implications for policy below include discussion of possible ways to alleviate and counter some of the societal factors that exacerbate gendered disadvantages during adolescence, and measures to help build the capacity of individuals and families to take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

### **8.1 Development of society**

#### **8.1.1 Investment in safe, accessible, girl-friendly and high-quality secondary education to assist girls to stay in school for longer**

Our findings establish the critical importance of keeping girls in school until at least the age of 15 for reducing the probability of child marriage. Policies that seek to retain girls in school would need to address three main factors:

- **Inequitable access to educational institutions:** Girls from the poorest and most socially disadvantaged backgrounds have the worst enrolment and educational outcomes. Measures such as the Government's current initiative to support girls from the Scheduled Tribes living in remote areas to access schools and residential facilities for free in urban areas can help to redress this imbalance.
- **Quality of teaching:** Increasingly, girls are experiencing higher levels of enrolment. However, they still receive less investment in their education than boys and commonly attend schools that are perceived to provide poorer-quality education (attendance at which can impact negatively on girls' school performance and increase the likelihood of their leaving school early). Policies should aim to improve the standard of education offered by both free government schools and private fee-paying schools.
- **Quality of school environment:** Where girls' safety is compromised by their attendance at school (either while at school or on their journey to school), they are more likely to leave education. Policies which tackle gender-based violence in schools and communities can alleviate these risks. Girls may also be more likely to remain in school if suitable facilities are provided to meet their water and sanitation needs.

#### **8.1.2 Strong and comprehensive social protection systems and support for the poorest households**

Access to social protection helps to alleviate the economic constraints that lead the poorest families to invest less in their daughters than in their sons. For instance, a number of studies have shown the positive impact that cash transfer schemes can have on increasing the age of marriage and reducing teenage pregnancy (see Glassman et al. 2012; Ellsberg et al. 2015). Schemes may be conditional or unconditional, but should in all cases be child-sensitive and give strong consideration to possible intended and unintended consequences (for further

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discussion of child-sensitive social protection see UNICEF 2009). This may be particularly important where conditions are included, and there is a wide-ranging debate about the advantages and disadvantages of conditionality. For example, one such programme – the Apni Beti Apna Dhan programme (in North India) – sought to delay girls' marriages by offering families a cash transfer upon the birth of a daughter, and another conditional on delaying her marriage until she was 18 or over. A recent evaluation by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) found that enrolment in the programme motivated parents to keep girls in school until at least Grade 8, but it did not reduce the probability that girls would marry before they were 18, and may have actually encouraged marriages at 18. It found that 'parents who desired to have their daughters married early did so immediately upon receiving the cash benefit', using the latter often as a means to cover the costs of their daughter's wedding and dowry (Nanda et al. 2015: 4). Conversely, another cash transfer programme, in Malawi, tested the effects of both conditional and unconditional cash transfers; the conditional transfers were more successful at reducing school drop-out, but 'teenage pregnancy and marriage rates were substantially lower' under the unconditional transfer intervention (Baird et al. 2011: 1709).

### **8.1.3 Better access for young women to economic opportunities, so that staying in school and delaying marriage are more worthwhile for girls and their families**

Improving livelihood opportunities for women and girls can help to prevent child marriage and early child-bearing. First, it can raise aspirations for and investments in girls' education. One randomised evaluation conducted in India, for example, tested the effect of improving awareness of and access to existing employment opportunities for women in randomly selected rural villages. This resulted in higher investments in women's education, increased school enrolment for girls and even improvements to their nutrition and health. It also increased girls' career aspirations and, crucially, made 15- to 21-year-olds 5–6 per cent less likely to marry or give birth during the three-year intervention. The findings of the study demonstrate how improving livelihood opportunities for women can raise girls' aspirations and make parents more willing to invest in them, 'in anticipation of labour market returns far in the future' (Jensen 2012: 3).

Second, improving women's employment opportunities can improve their family's economic status, thereby alleviating some of the pressures that push parents to make gendered decisions regarding their daughters' future. Moreover, as demonstrated by the impact of the MGNREGS, raising women's economic contributions to the household can improve their bargaining power, which can have a positive impact on girls' school attendance and performance.

Finally, it is important that employment opportunities provide decent work for girls, since otherwise girls and families may seek opportunities for marriage as a way of freeing girls from poor working environments.

### **8.1.4 Effective interventions with communities and families (including boys and men) to address social norms and to reduce the risk of sexual and gender-based violence**

Gendered social risks resulting from girls' vulnerability to gender-based violence and harassment can encourage families to marry girls early as a protective measure. These risks may be countered by improving the safety of public and private spaces. Evidence from a variety of interventions shows the promising effects on the incidence of gender-based violence of group training (e.g. regarding violence, power and control) for women and men,

community mobilisation interventions and initiatives which combine anti-violence training with livelihood interventions (Ellsberg et al. 2015). Studies show that effective programmes 'are commonly participatory, engage multiple stakeholders, support critical discussion about gender relationships and the acceptability of violence, and support greater communication and shared decision-making among family members, as well as non-violent behaviour' (ibid.: 1). It is also important to have proper systems of referral for victims and reporting of incidents as well as appropriate forms of sanction.

### **8.1.5 Better access to sexual and reproductive health services for adolescent married girls, couples and communities to assist in delaying first births**

Poor access to sexual and reproductive health services and information limits girls' and boys' understanding of and means to prevent early pregnancy. Limited awareness among communities of the negative health impacts for young girls of early sexual activity and for young mothers and their babies of early pregnancy and childbirth may also be sustaining the social norms that engender these practices. Policies that improve provision and awareness can help counter the incentives for adhering to these norms. Schemes already in place in India, such as DISHA (the Development Initiative Supporting Healthy Adolescents) and PRACHAR (meaning 'promote' in Hindi), which provide young people, their families and adult members of the community with access to contraceptive methods and information about reproductive health (through a combination of awareness-raising mechanisms, health visitors and volunteers) have been shown to increase the age of marriage, increase the use of contraceptives and delay age of first birth. DISHA increased the age of marriage in participating villages from on average 15.9 years to 17.9 years old, and PRACHAR increased the age of marriage by 1.5 years and the age of first birth by 2.1 years (Glassman, Silverman, and McQueston 2012).

## **8.2 Development for adolescent girls**

Alongside the activities mentioned above, it is important to ensure that girls have the capacity and resources they need to take advantage of opportunities offered by enabling environments. We therefore include here some additional aspects of development for adolescent girls specifically. It is important to note, however, that where girls do not experience an enabling environment within which to make their own decisions regarding marriage, interventions targeted at individual girls are unlikely to succeed. It is therefore crucial that activities also be undertaken towards the development of society, and that household and community decision-makers are included in the design of initiatives with adolescent girls.

### **8.2.1 Encouraging female role models so that girls and their families can envisage positive alternatives to child marriage**

As suggested in a recent report from the Overseas Development Institute, without examples of 'positive deviance', 'girls cannot visualise better horizons' (Harper et al. 2014: 6), with deleterious consequences for their aspirations. Supporting and promoting cases of positive deviance, such as where girls' marriages are delayed and they instead complete higher levels of education and/or move successfully into paid employment, can help improve girls' awareness of alternatives to child marriage and can help increase the value parents place upon girls' education. Furthermore, increasing the presence of female role models, such as women in leadership positions, has been shown to raise girls' aspirations. A randomised natural experiment conducted in villages across India demonstrated that where leadership

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positions had been reserved on the village councils for women and a female leader had been assigned for two election cycles, girls showed increased career aspirations and better educational attainment and spent less time on household chores. In fact, gender gaps in parental aspirations closed by 20 per cent and those in adolescents' own aspirations by 32 per cent. Gender gaps in adolescent education attainment disappeared (Beaman et al. 2012).

### **8.2.2 Challenging discriminatory norms and empowering girls with information and skills to help them take advantage of opportunities (where opportunities exist)**

Other initiatives have succeeded in tackling discriminatory norms by encouraging positive deviance among girls and communities. In conjunction with other activities directed towards the development of society, programmes which engage in training and dialogue comprehensively with girls and their communities have been found to influence the age of marriage positively. These initiatives often aim to 'empower girls with information, skills and support networks' while simultaneously 'educating and mobilising parents and community members' (ICRW 2011: 26).

One such programme, currently being implemented by the ICRW, is promoting 'safe spaces' in rural Rajasthan, focusing on a variety of activities simultaneously. It aims to, 'enhance community support to keep girls in schools and promote higher education, through delayed marriages, ... to create public spaces free from violence [and to] ... improve girls' knowledge about [and access to] sexual and reproductive health services' (ICRW 2015). Another, the Maharashtra Life Skills Program, succeeded in increasing the mean age of marriage among girls taking part by one year – from 16 to 17 years old – and saw a 20 per cent reduction in the proportion of girls marrying by the age of 18 in the intervention area (Lee-Rife et al. 2012). The programme was simple: it aimed to gather unmarried adolescent girls together for one hour every week over the course of a year, using that time to teach about sexual and reproductive health, communication, decision-making and local government. Added to this, parents joined the meetings regarding sexual and reproductive health and community members were encouraged to become mentors to young girls (Girls Not Brides 2014).

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# Appendix

**Table A1. Descriptive statistics**

			Not married (by age 18)		Married (by age 18)		Total	
			%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
<b>Location – urban</b>		No	68.1	250	31.9	117	100	367
		Yes	86.2	100	13.8	16	100	116
Caregiver's education	None	No	82.1	161	17.9	35	100	196
		Yes	65.2	189	34.8	101	100	290
	0–4 years	No	72.2	332	27.8	128	100	460
		Yes	69.2	18	30.8	8	100	26
	5–9 years	No	69.8	259	30.2	112	100	371
		Yes	79.1	91	20.9	24	100	115
	10–12 years	No	69.8	309	30.2	134	100	443
		Yes	95.3	41	4.7	2	100	43
	More than 12 years	No	71.5	339	28.5	135	100	474
		Yes	91.7	11	8.3	1	100	12
Child's caste	SC	No	72.7	280	27.3	105	100	385
		Yes	69.3	70	30.7	31	100	101
	ST	No	72.2	307	27.8	118	100	425
		Yes	70.5	43	29.5	18	100	61
	BC	No	75.6	205	24.4	66	100	271
		Yes	67.4	145	32.6	70	100	215
	OC	No	68.4	258	31.6	119	100	377
		Yes	84.4	92	15.6	17	100	109
Terciles of wealth	Tercile 1 (bottom)	No	75.4	245	24.6	80	100	325
		Yes	65.2	105	34.8	56	100	161
	Tercile 2 (Middle)	No	74.9	242	25.1	81	100	323
		Yes	66.3	108	33.7	55	100	163
	Tercile 3 (Top)	No	65.7	213	34.3	111	100	324
		Yes	84.6	137	15.4	25	100	162
Household composition	Having an older sister	No	69.6	208	30.4	91	100	299
		Yes	75.9	142	24.1	45	100	187
Child education	Enrolled at age 12	No	33.9	21	66.1	41	100	62
		Yes	77.6	329	22.4	95	100	424
	Enrolled at age 15	No	37	47	63	80	100	127
		Yes	84.8	302	15.2	54	100	356
	Enrolled at age 19	No	56.3	161	43.7	125	100	286
		Yes	94.9	186	5.1	10	100	196
Parental aspirations – at 12 yrs	Up to Grade 10	No	82.7	243	17.3	51	100	294
		Yes	61.4	94	38.6	59	100	153
	Up to Grade 12	No	75.9	305	24.1	97	100	402
		Yes	71.1	32	28.9	13	100	45
	Post-secondary	No	63.6	126	36.4	72	100	198
		Yes	84.7	211	15.3	38	100	249
Child aspirations at 12 yrs	Up to Grade 10	No	80.9	280	19.1	66	100	346
		Yes	50.8	67	49.2	65	100	132
	Up to Grade 12	No	72.8	316	27.2	118	100	434
		Yes	70.5	31	29.5	13	100	44
	Post-secondary	No	55.7	98	44.3	78	100	176
		Yes	82.5	249	17.5	53	100	302
Caregiver expects age at marriage >19 yrs (recorded at 12 yrs)		No	56.1	55	43.9	43	100	98
		Yes	76.8	258	23.2	78	100	336
Child has had menarche by age 12		No	76.4	269	23.6	83	100	352
		Yes	61.2	79	38.8	50	100	<b>129</b>

# Child Marriage and Early Child-bearing in India: Risk Factors and Policy Implications

**Jennifer Roest**

The prevalence of child marriage and early child-bearing has been declining across India over the past two decades, but absolute numbers remain high. This paper uses data collected from 3,000 children over 15 years in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to provide an evidence base from which to strengthen policy and programming in this area.

An ecological life-course framework is used to explore the causes of child marriage and early child-bearing and the factors which help to prevent them. Findings show that:

- girls who stay in school for longer marry later, but gender gaps in enrolment widen during adolescence;
- where household resources are limited, gendered social risks become more acute and parents are forced to make decisions which disadvantage girls;
- aspirations matter but reflect wider realities;
- social norms that encourage early child-bearing are compounded by inequitable access to health and education services.

While child marriage and early child-bearing are driven by entrenched patriarchal norms regarding the role and value of girls (and women) in society, structural factors are critical. Poverty and social disadvantage constrain girls' opportunities and exacerbate the risks they face, forcing individual girls and their families to maintain 'normal' practices, thus reinforcing norms. Our analysis helps to demonstrate the need for a layered strategy to tackle the gendered disadvantages which drive child marriage and early child-bearing.

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