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Supporting Married, Cohabiting and Divorced Adolescents: Insights from Comparative Research

This policy brief highlights findings from the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS), a qualitative research study carried out between 2017 and 2020 by Young Lives and Child Frontiers in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states) Peru, and Zambia. We find that:

- Despite laws prohibiting marriage under 18, many young people continue to marry and cohabit due to poverty, lack of opportunity, and entrenched gender norms.
- Informal unions are common in Ethiopia, Peru and Zambia; relationships of this kind may leave young women less protected than in formal marriages.
- Although older people say there is more gender equality than in previous generations, young people's unions continue to be marked by unequal power relationships, and traditional household and caring roles.
- Many young couples experience conflict, which can lead to violence. Divorce and separation are common in Peru, Ethiopia and Zambia, but not India.
- Young married and cohabiting parents say their children are a source of joy, but almost all regret the choices they made to marry or cohabit, and say they were unprepared for married life.
- There is a lack of services and support for young married, cohabiting and divorced couples. Many want to return to school, but few are able to do so. All hope to give their children better lives than their own.

Introduction

“ Married girls can be difficult to access with information, services and programmes because of their social isolation and limited power within the household or community. There is a dearth of evidence about how best to support their needs. ”

(Svanemyr et al. 2015)

Since the UN Sustainable Development Goals called for an end to child marriage by 2030, the focus of efforts at national and international levels has been on prevention. Many countries have made explicit commitments, and the numbers of children, mostly girls, being married are slowly decreasing in many countries, although there is still a long way to go (UNFPA 2020).

More recently, there has been increased interest in how to support the 12 million girls who continue to be married or form unions each year under the age of 18 (UNICEF 2019). In 2019, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on child, early and forced marriage, which for the first time looked at the need to support girls and women who have been married as children (Girls Not Brides 2019). Recent literature reviews have also identified this as a key area of research, and have noted a dearth of studies investigating young couples, their wider familial context, or young married men (Siddiqi and Greene 2019).

The Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) aimed to provide qualitative evidence on marriage, cohabitation, parenthood and divorce among marginalised adolescents and young people in Ethiopia, India (in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states),¹ Peru and Zambia. It was funded by IDRC, with primary and secondary research conducted by teams from Young Lives and Child Frontiers.

Over the course of the study, data were collected from 345 married, cohabiting or divorced girls, boys, and young people, and 77 group discussions were held with parents, community members and service providers. The study aimed to understand the reasons why children and young people marry, cohabit or have children, and to examine how they navigate their new roles and relationships, including parenting, separation and divorce, support and services, and their diverse experiences, motivations and aspirations.

Key findings

Regret at marrying young

“ I would have loved to get married after completing school or when I was in my twenties ... But looking at our livelihood and how money for school was hard to find ... there was nothing I could do. ”

(Young woman, divorced, Zambia; dropped out of school in Grade 7, married at age 17)

The young people in this study come from families with few resources, which gives them limited choices in their lives. They married young despite a growing consensus among both adult parents and young people that delaying marriage and parenthood until their early twenties is preferable. Marriage and cohabitation are driven by poverty, a lack of livelihood possibilities, and rigid social and gender norms. Despite the hope that a union would improve their lives, most say they regret marrying, although marriage, and particularly parenthood, has afforded some improved status in their communities. Most of the young people dream of finding ways out of poverty and back into education or training.

Increased awareness of gender equality

“ Now, the girl and boy have to like each other and they have to talk to each other before marriage. It was not like that when we were younger. Our parents told us to marry and we married. ”

(Adult mother-in-law, rural India)

Young people and their parents believe that an increased awareness of gender equality is a major change between generations. In reality, however, girls' and boys' lives continue to be shaped by poverty and discriminatory gender norms, and gender gaps widen significantly at the onset of adolescence (Young Lives 2018). Many are not able to stay in school, and this often leads to marriage, cohabitation and young parenthood; trajectories not so different from previous generations. Attitudes to sexuality, young marriage, pregnancy and reproduction shape life paths in profound ways.

An increase in informal marriages and unions

“ Living together is as big a responsibility as a marriage. ”

(Separated young man, age 24, urban Ethiopia; began cohabiting around age 22)

In urban Ethiopia, Peru and Zambia, informal marriage and cohabitation are becoming increasingly common, sometimes driven by the cost of formal marriage, and sometimes due to the belief that it is easier to leave an informal than a formal union. This is most evident in Peru. In many cases, it is pregnancy that leads to cohabitation. However, informality comes at the cost of more fragile partnerships, in which young women are often isolated and at risk of being abandoned by partners following pregnancy and childbirth.

¹ The research in India was funded by the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, with data collected between October and December 2016. The India study design and findings informed the development of data collection tools for YMAPS in Ethiopia, Peru and Zambia and thus facilitate the comparative analysis.

Lack of knowledge about contraception, pregnancy and parenting

“ I came to know about these things only after becoming pregnant ... I was not aware of these techniques before marriage ... Even he [my husband] was not aware of the family planning methods. ”

(Young woman, rural India: married at age 19 when husband was 29)

Young people marry not only at their parents' bidding, but because they are in love, having sex, or are pregnant. The strict norms around girls' sexuality and prohibitions on having sex outside marriage then make marriage or cohabitation the only option, particularly if a girl is pregnant. There is huge stigma around being an unmarried mother, and in India it remains an almost completely hidden phenomenon.

However, the young people in this study also enter sexual relationships with very little knowledge and understanding about relationships, or information about contraception and abortion. They widely report health staff to be judgemental and unfriendly. Very few have access to contraception or contraceptive advice until after the birth of their first child, which means that many become first-time parents before they want to.

Box 1. Marrying too young: Sunitha, India

Sunitha is from a rural area. When she was interviewed, she was 16 and living with her husband, 10-month-old son, and mother-in-law. She was married at 13, which she thinks was much too young. She feels she had her child too young as well. When she married, she had not been told about sexual intimacy, contraception or how to delay pregnancy. She says that living with her husband's family means she has little power or influence over household decisions, finances, labour, her own mobility, or her reproductive choices. She hopes to wait another year before having her second child, but the couple are not using contraception

Box 2. What makes a good husband?: Guillermo, Peru

Guillermo, a young man from a rural area, dropped out of school because he had to do paid work. He married at 18 and now says he has little time to spend at home with his wife and their daughter. He believes a good husband: “should be with his family ... should give them everything [materially and emotionally] ... should make them laugh ... make them happy ... make them feel good”. He says his wife is the one who looks after their daughter, though when he is around, he bathes and dresses her, gives her milk, prepares her food, and plays and watches TV with her. He would like to have a regular day off to spend more time with his family.

Unequal power relationships in young marriage and cohabitation

“ We should not encourage a wife [to undertake] decision-making; once a husband allows his wife to decide, he will be under her control. ”

(Young man, age 22, rural Ethiopia: married at 19)

Although many young couples say they want to live independently, a lack of resources as well as local customs means this is not always possible. Living with in-laws means that young women have little say in how the home is run. Marrying someone older than they are gives them even less power. By age 22, the average age gap between young women and their older husbands/partners was 7.2 years in Ethiopia, 6.6 years in India and 3.9 years in Peru.² Even for those couples who are able to live on their own, strong gendered norms continue to influence the idea of the husband as provider and the wife as caregiver, and give the husband control over major decisions in the household. Many young men struggle to provide for their families but also do not want their wives or partners to do paid work, leading to tensions in the household. Young women feel their lives are very constrained, with little choice or freedom.

Repeating cycles of violence

“ One day ... I was late. I knew my dad could be mean; sometimes he would hit me when I was late. I was afraid ... This is how they found out that I was in love, and they told me I couldn't go out any more ... and that's when I went with him [boyfriend]. ”

(Young woman, age 17, rural Peru; began cohabiting at 16)

Many couples say they have experienced relationship troubles, and married and cohabiting girls and young women can face violence from their husbands or partners. This then becomes part of a repeating pattern; girls may have married or begun informal unions in order to escape violence, usually from their fathers, in their natal home, only to experience it again in their own relationships. Many young women say that it was after marriage that their husbands began to behave differently. Conflict and violence are often caused by a perceived failure of married or cohabiting girls and young women to carry out household work or cooking to their husband's satisfaction. These tensions can lead to violence, or to divorce and separation.

2 Young Lives 2016 survey (Briones and Porter 2019: 12).

Divorce and separation

““ I wanted to take care of the child myself at any cost by working as a day labourer. Though this was challenging for me at the beginning, now I have learned how to cope with this challenge. ””

(Single mother, age 24, rural Ethiopia)

Reasons for divorce or separation in Ethiopia, Peru and Zambia include the inability or perceived unwillingness of the husband or partner to meet the economic and material needs of the household. Others include unfaithfulness and lack of trust, and escaping a husband or partner's abuse or violence. A small number of men, particularly in Ethiopia and Zambia, leave their marriages because they feel they cannot care for their families. Some couples separate because they cannot afford to live together even though they want to, or because they feel they were too young when they married or cohabited and now know better. In India only a very small number of couples separate due the stigma involved.

Nonetheless, in some settings, young women who are divorced report that their lives have improved, provided they are able to manage financially, either by earning a living or having their basic needs met by a supportive family. This is particularly true for those who have escaped violent or abusive relationships.

Lack of services and support

““ Mostly ... grandmothers look after the babies [or] sisters-in-law or someone you can afford to pay, but someone close ... Right now, everything is private. I think there should be [a public nursery run by the state], because there are many girls who want to work. ””

(Young mothers in discussion group, Peru)

The context of family poverty is often matched by a lack of services and support for young married or cohabiting couples and their families. Many girls and boys and young men and young women express a strong wish to return to education, and yet in most cases, poverty, lack of support or services, together with gendered social norms, make this impossible. Young men in particular feel a lot of pressure to be the breadwinner, but paid work is often not available. There is little publicly available childcare, and young married couples rarely use it if it is available, as mothers are expected to do the childcare, or, as in Peru, young mothers distrust the services offered. Some young mothers express a wish to have more training and support so that they can contribute financially to the household.

Likewise, access to services for couples experiencing marital conflict is limited in most communities, or married individuals, especially girls and young women, do not dare to use them. Traditional justice systems are available in some rural areas, but these tend to prioritise keeping the couple together even if the relationship is violent or abusive. The result of this lack of support is that young people have to rely heavily on their families. Young women in particular are only able to leave violent relationships with the support of their families, meaning that if they come from violent families themselves they have nowhere to turn.

Box 3. The stresses of young parenting, Ethiopia

Demekech, age 22 and from a rural area in Ethiopia, was married at the age of 18. Her husband had wanted to delay their marriage until he felt economically secure, but they married anyway. He says:

““ When you don't have money to hand, life is very challenging. You need money for every activity. When your child is sick, you need money. To lead a household, you have to think of ways that boost your income, and this was why I wanted to delay my marriage. ””

Demekech feels that life is more stressful now that she is married and has a child:

““ [I faced] no worry for anything while I was with my family because I got everything I needed from my parents. I did not worry about food because my mother was in charge. Now I seriously have to work because I think about what my family consumes and it makes me stressed. ””

Box 4. Hopes for their children's future, Zambia

Some young parents focus their hopes on improving their children's futures. Both young mothers and fathers say they want their children to go to school. Natasha is 17 years old and from an urban area. She became pregnant and married at 16. She says:

““ I don't want my child to pass through the life I have passed through. Since I want to go back to school, I have plans for my child. By the time my child is 4 years old, I will have completed school and be doing something else so that I can educate my child. ””

Chuma, age 18, is from an urban area. He married at 17, and dropped out of school in Grade 6. He says:

““ I am planning to enrol my child in school so that she learns and completes school. I just need to work hard and find a place for us to live so that even if I were to die, [my child] won't be left stranded. ””

Policy recommendations

Young marriage is driven by poverty, inequality and gender norms that prioritise men over women and boys over girls. Measures to reduce young marriage and improve the lives of young married couples and parents must seek to address these issues, support individuals and couples, work with their families and communities, and take into account the broader context of the laws, services and institutions with which they engage.

The broader context

1. **Listen to, respect, and act on what young married and cohabiting adolescents** have to say.
2. Take account of married and cohabiting adolescents **in poverty alleviation and livelihoods strategies** directed at the poorest families. Include them in social protection measures and cash transfers. Give young women and men opportunities for decent work and livelihoods programmes and training.
3. **Laws banning child marriage are important, but not enough on their own.** Align legal and customary laws and monitor their take-up. Train judges and legal services personnel to be aware of the needs of those married under 18, and of the consequences of criminalisation, especially for peers in consensual relationships. Make children and adolescents aware of their rights and give them access to justice. Equalise inheritance and land rights between women and men, with an awareness of their effects on those who marry young. Give informal marriages and unions the same legal protection, services and support as formal marriages.

Education and training

4. **Encourage and support young women and young men to return to school** after pregnancy and marriage or cohabitation. This can include policies that ensure they are allowed to stay in, or return to, school when pregnant or after childbirth, and social protection measures such as cash transfer payments for enrolment and continuation.
5. **Provide appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in schools.** Teachers need to be trained to work with adolescents with respect and understanding.
6. Provide programmes in schools from an early age: for **girls to build capacity, confidence, and skills**, and for **boys to promote more progressive models of masculinity** and non-violence.
7. For those who do not want to return to school, **provide opportunities outside formal school to learn and gain skills and experience.**

Health

8. Improve the quantity, quality and dissemination of health services for young adolescents, particularly **specific services on sexual and reproductive health.**
9. Give **health workers ongoing training on how to support** sexual and reproductive health and rights with adolescents, both girls and boys, whether they are married or not. This means services delivered with respect, confidentiality and privacy, and using media and social media as well as more traditional methods to convey messages and ideas.

Gender-transformative programming

10. **Provide programmes aimed at parents, families (including male relatives such as uncles and brothers and grandfathers) and community members** to engage them in discussions on sex, sexuality, love, and attitudes to young people, especially girls, having sex before marriage, within a broader context of gender equality that values girls and boys and women and men equally.
11. **Provide gender-transformative training for local government officials and traditional leaders.**
12. **Work with boys and young men** before and after marriage so that they **respect women and girls and expect to take on an equal share of household work and childcare.** This is a powerful way of improving relationship, reducing violence in the home, and encouraging broader equality.

Support and services

13. Strengthen support networks for **young married or cohabiting girls and women**, linking them to community networks and resources, psychosocial support, safe spaces, and mentoring opportunities. Young couples also need support, counselling and mediation.
14. Provide a range of tailored services to **support divorced and separated young people**, including access to formal and informal justice systems.
15. **Provide local, affordable, quality childcare** for babies and children of young parents.

Research

16. **Broaden the research base on the lives of young married couples and parents.** In one large-scale literature review, research on improving the lives of married girls made up only 7.3 per cent of publications examined (Siddiqi and Greene 2019).

Conclusion

“Life does not end for girls [or boys] who marry, cohabit or who become mothers [or fathers] in childhood.”

(Crivello et al. 2018)

Despite the difficulties they experience in marriage or cohabitation and parenting, many young people remain hopeful. They want to feel safe and cared for in their relationships; to live a dignified life despite poverty; to return to, or finish their education; to find ways of earning a living and accessing training; and, most importantly, to ensure that their own children go to school in order to give them a better future. Understanding, supporting, and listening to this generation of adolescents who have married or cohabited and become parents is a critical step in breaking the cycle of young marriage for the next generation and achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

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Further reading

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Comparative and policy reports

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