

Child Marriage and Educational Achievement: Evidence from India



Child Marriage and the Right to Education: Evidence from India

Evidence Submitted to the Office of High Commission of Human Rights

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Executive Summary

This submission analyzes the complex relationship between early marriage and educational attainment in India. The evidence is informed by the findings of two research projects exploring and documenting the factors impinging on educational access for marginalized, Indian, adolescent girls, as part of a more general inquiry into agency and empowerment project. The *Shanu Project* investigates the **obstacles** to secondary school educational access and success for rural adolescents, particularly girls, in the north western state of Gujarat. Conversely, the *Champions Project* is an in-depth investigation of the structural and social **supports** that enabled girls from uneducated families to reach college level education, across universities in Maharashtra.

Data from the *Shanu Project* in Gujarat demonstrate the intransigence of social and economic obstacles that poor, rural girls face when pushing social norms. Early marriage and the narrow classification of adolescent girls' potential on the basis of their marriage prospects seriously impact girls' prospects of accessing their right to education in a meaningful way. Married children are 2.11 (and engaged children 1.95) times more likely not to be in school than single children. Concern over girls' reputations within their socially conservative communities, and a narrow definition of future life prospects after marriage contribute to the early termination of adolescent girls' schooling. Child marriage, then, is correlated with serious educational disadvantage and has knock on effects on future employment opportunity and financial security. Relatedly, findings from the *Champions Project* in Maharashtra demonstrate how education can act as a substantial protective force against the pressures of early marriage. 96 percent (n=403) of the 19 and 20 year old participants in Maharashtra wide study were unmarried. This is in stark contrast with Statewide data which has shown that 51 percent of women are married before age 20 (Moore et al 2009). In the Champions study 48 percent of participants reported that being in education helped them to resist the pressures of early marriage "to a great extent". A further 34 percent found it "somewhat helpful". This finding highlights the inversely correlated relationship between education and delayed marriage in socially conservative societies. These projects are being led by Jacqueline Bhabha, the Director of Research at the François Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University. Founded in 1992 through a gift from the Association François-Xavier Bagnoud, the FXB Center works to protect and promote the rights and well-being of young people in extreme circumstances worldwide, through targeted research, teaching and advocacy.

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Background

Early marriage has been linked with low educational attainment, poor health outcomes for offspring, low maternal social status in husbands' families, compromised reproductive control, and high rates of maternal mortality and marital violence (Jensen & Thornton 2003¹, Raj et al 2010). International and domestic laws and policies to halt the practice of child marriage have been widely sanctioned. Yet, the phenomenon is still widespread in many parts of the developing world, including India. In fact, nearly half—45 percent—of young women in India marry before the legal age of 18, and this figure rises to 53 percent in rural areas. By the age of 20, 63 percent of Indian women marry (Moore 2009).

Several factors compound the vulnerability of the child bride's position. Grooms are, on average, six years older than brides (IIPS 2007) and age differences are significantly greater for child brides. More than 90 percent of newly married couples in India live with the groom's parents immediately after marriage, and an incoming daughter-in-law is expected to conform to the lifestyle of a new family (Desai 2010). Marriage also usually leads relatively quickly to childbearing, given pressure, largely exerted by mothers-in-law through their sons, for a young bride to get pregnant (Barua and Kurz 2008).

In contemporary India, formal education has so far proved to be the most effective mechanism for enhancing female empowerment. It is the most important determinant of the timing of marriage, affecting the age at which a girl is obliged to leave her home and defer to the wishes of her in-laws. (Clark et al 2006). Despite the long standing legislative prohibition on child marriage² enforcement remains dismal. Cultural expectations and perceptions surrounding the overarching importance of marriage as an insurance policy for daughters perpetuate early marriage and continue to negatively affect girls' educational prospects. This general finding is confirmed by a recent study conducted by the Harvard FXB Center in collaboration with the Indian Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). The study was based on a 376 household survey, on focus groups and on key informant interviews across five villages in North Western Gujarat. This submission provides evidence that early marriage and the narrow classification of adolescent girls as future wives seriously impacts girls' ability to access their right to education. Further, a mixed methods study with 403 college students across Maharashtra conducted by the FXB Center in collaboration with the Women's

¹ Jensen and Thornton (2003) provide a recent overview of these patterns worldwide.

² Indian legislation banned child marriage in 1929 and enforced it with the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 making it illegal for girls to marry below 18 and for boys below 21 years

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Studies Center at the University of Pune, shows that familial support for educational advancement enables young women from traditionally marginalized communities to pursue empowered and productive lives.

Overview and Methodology

Shanu Project:

The project name, Shanu, was chosen to honor the memory of 16 year old Shanu Jeevanbhai Ahir. Shanu was a young girl, who, two weeks before this project was launched in the field, committed suicide by hanging herself in her village home in Bavarda, Gujarat. According to her family, despair over the economic consequences of the failed monsoon and anxiety about domestic violence in her future husband's family were precipitating factors. The name also serves as a Gujarati acronym: Shikshan Ane Nava Upaya, which translates to Education and New Solutions. The research began with an in-depth community assessment using a quantitative survey and qualitative components, randomly targeting adolescents and female caregivers across five villages. The villages were selected using a non-random purposive sample. They were chosen by the Indian Project partner, SEWA, on the basis of strong village population membership within the association³, the villages' proximity to one another, and the relative accessibility of the villages to the association's local headquarters.

A convenience sample was collected using lists of households with adolescents provided by the village administration.⁴ A total of 376 adolescents were selected, stratified by age group (10-13 and 14-17) and gender into even subsamples of 94 each. In households with adolescents, 376 caregivers, 95 percent of whom were female, completed the caregiver's questionnaire. Samples were weighted per village proportional to population. A total of 752 people participated in the survey providing more extensive data on personal experiences and opinions. With caregivers reporting on all members of the household, background and demographic information was collected on a total of 2102 subjects. In January 2011, the team returned to the villages to disseminate the survey results and to carry out interviews with teachers and focus groups composed of adolescent girls in school, not in school, and their mothers. The focus group provided further insight into the daily lives of adolescent girls and the barriers they face accessing education.

³ 97.19% of the families sampled were members of the organization.

⁴ The village census lists were obtained from local Aganwadis. These are government-sponsored preschool facilities for children aged 0-6. The facilities provide health check-ups, clean water, clean toilets and a learning environment for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. In these particular communities, the Aganwadis, in conjunction with the village Gram Panchayat, keep annually updated census information on the villagers.

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Champions Project:

In the Champions Project, we employ a positive deviance approach, which deconstructs the uncommon behaviors of the successful minority to amplify efficacious strategies for the benefit of the disadvantaged majority, in an examination of the factors associated with educational success. The FXB Center partnered with the Women's Studies Center at the University of Pune.

To date we have gathered quantitative data with 425, and qualitative data with 40, Champions across 10 districts in Maharashtra. We define 'Champions' as girls enrolled in the second year of college whose parents only have a primary school education or less. Participants were chosen on the basis of their parents' educational attainment starting at the lowest levels and moving up⁵. The questionnaire⁶ is designed to gather data on the following topics: demographic information, familial economic and educational profile, school attendance history (type, distance, infrastructure), teacher appraisal, sexual harassment (from teachers, peers and community), aspirations, role models and plans to work, parental support for education, perceived pressure to marry, access to government schemes and college experience.

To add depth and texture to the study, 40 research participants were selected (two from each college) to participate in a writing lives work shop at the Pune University Women's Studies Center. The format of the workshop was designed to allow participants to prepare visual and written accounts of their lives, utilizing games, group discussions, poster making and letter and diary writing

The FXB Center is in the process of scaling the Project to include 600 more participants across the State of Rajasthan. The local partners in this state, the Institute of Development Studies Jaipur, are experts in gender, development and education

Child Marriage and Educational Attainment

In the *Shanu Project* study, the intricate relationship between child marriage and educational attainment was found to be a determining factor in the adolescent girls' futures.

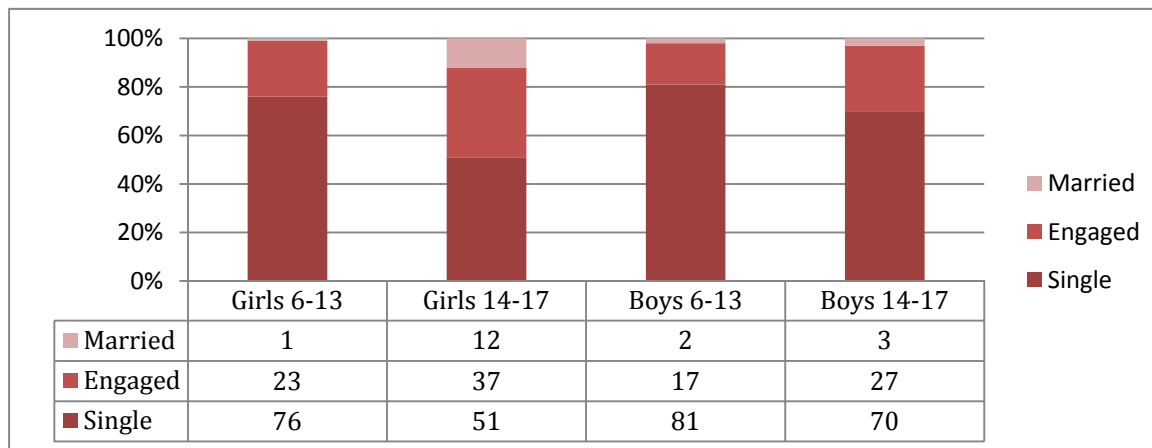
⁵ Preference was given to those whose parents had never attended school, then to those who have a parent with some primary level education and so on. Students with a parent, who had completed the lower secondary exam (10th), were not eligible for inclusion. In each college, all second-year students were asked to complete a short eligibility questionnaire, in which they are asked about parents' education levels. Results from this questionnaire were tabulated and a list of eligible students will be compiled. All students who meet the parental education eligibility criterion were asked to participate.

⁶ The survey instrument comprised of self-developed measures as well as measures developed by the World Health Organization, the Population Council, Population Foundation of India and academic institutions.

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The prevalence of marriage and engagement was far higher among young girls in the five villages surveyed than among the young boys in the same villages. As Figure 1 illustrates, of the girls aged 14-17, 37 percent were engaged and 12 percent married, as opposed to only 27 percent and 3 percent of the boys aged 14-17 respectively.

Figure 1. Marital Status of Children 6-17 in the Household in Gujarat



Marital status among adolescents is associated with school attendance rates: 78.32 percent of single children were attending school compared to 48.28 percent of married children. Married children were 2.11 (and engaged children 1.95) times more likely not to be in school than single children. Marriage also constrained girls' lives more than boys: only 57 percent of married girls were enrolled in school compared to 80 percent of married boys.

The *Champions Project* provided evidence of the virtuous circle of continued education, increased decision making power and delayed marriage. In the sample of 403 Champions 96 percent were single, 2 percent engaged and 2 percent were married. Of those married the average marriage age was 19.6. This is in stark contrast to the rest of the State of Maharashtra where 51 percent of women are married before age 20 (Moore et al 2009). According to UNICEF this rate rises to 56 percent for rural girls (UNICEF 2011). For study participants the opportunity to advance educationally was closely linked to a supportive familial network. While participants engaged in a lot of discussion around marriage, very few (1 percent) reported coming under 'a lot of pressure' to marry from their immediate family.

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Table 1. Pressure from Parents to Marry (n=403)

A lot	1%
A little	25%
Never	74%

By contrast, one in four participants reported coming under a lot of pressure from social circles beyond their immediate family, particularly from extended family. Educational success played a critical role enabling those who felt this social pressure to resist early marriage. As table 2 below shows 82 percent of those who felt this pressure reported that education made it easier to resist.

Table 2. Education Make It Easier to Resist Pressure to Marry from Others (n=129)

	Percent
No	18%
Somewhat	34%
To great extent	48%

The study's Champions also described the source of the pressure to marry in the writing lives workshop which the FXB Center and the Pune University Women Studies Center conducted:

"...My own family does not pressurize me too much to get married but other relatives are more active with regard to this and keep troubling me a lot." Champion 22

"....Actually my uncle had got me a proposal for marriage while I was still in the tenth standard because he could not tolerate the fact that I was pursuing further education. My uncle caused very difficult episode because I had refused him point blank and he felt very angry." Champion 21 Age 20

".....When I was in my tenth standard, some people came to see me. My aunt was telling me to get married because that boy was good. But I did not want to get married that early. Luckily, my sister [first] had to get married that's why we refused them. Though my child marriage did not happen, I

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feel bad for those who get married as children. Those are their days of playing, having fun and learning. Instead household responsibilities are put on them. Families of these girls' restrict her existence only to cooking and taking care of her children. She is married off against her wishes. In the rural areas the girl child gets married off as soon as she comes of age. The parents start looking out for a suitable match and soon she is married off. She is still undergoing lot of mental and physical changes and does not even know how she should behave or talk to others. Yet she has to bear all of this. Why does the girl have to bear all this?..." Champion 21 Age 20

Marriage, Education and Gender Roles

In the *Shanu Project*, the relatively large number of girls (23 percent) and boys (17 percent) engaged at or before the age of 13 confirms the continuing prevalence of “guana,” a practice, whereby girls are promised in marriage yet may not live with their husbands until they have reached puberty and the marriage ceremony is consecrated. According to the International Institute for Population Sciences (2007), “guana” is generally found in poorer, more traditional Indian states where child marriages are a mark of prestige.

The focus groups conducted as part of the FXB *Shanu Project* study confirmed the overriding importance of marriage as a source of girls' social status. Interviewed girls evoked a sense of obligation and responsibility towards their families which superseded any personal ambitions for higher education or career.

“Out of duty to her family members the girls are leaving the school early. It is much easier for parents if there is a girl to do household work.” School dropout Age 15 Village D

“Once a girl reaches a certain age then she must care for her siblings and do her embroidery and go to the fields. It is a girl's responsibility to her parents.” School dropout Age 16 Village A

Mothers placed their daughters in traditional female roles serving the family. They appeared to value education as a tool to strengthen a girl in her roles as “daughter,” then “daughter-in-law,” “wife,” and “mother:”

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“If a daughter is educated, then she can also teach her mother, younger sister. My daughter keeps the financial accounts. But the problem is that she leaves for the-in-laws house.” -Mother Village D

“Yes, an educated daughter can give tuition at home, while grocery shopping she can handle the accounts.” –Mother Village C

Another contributing factor to girls’ marginalization from the schooling system is the universal concern that mixed gender adolescent relationships prior to marriage damage the value of a daughter in the marriage market. It is difficult to find data on premarital sex, but studies indicate that less than 5 percent of Indian women acknowledge having sex before marriage, and often this includes premarital sex with men they subsequently marry (Santhya and Jejeebhoy 2007). In practice, a girl does not even have to be sexually active to be labeled promiscuous. Simple contact and platonic friendships with the opposite sex can be enough to damage her reputation (Caldwell et al. 1983; Caldwell et al. 1998; Lindenbaum 1981). The influence of these factors emerged from the *Shanu* focus groups. A mother, asked how she would feel about her daughter attending school in another village, replied:

“When our daughter leaves for school or leaves to do work, we are afraid very much because the times are not good.” Mother village A

A focus group with local adolescent girls also echoed this concern:

“There are girls from the village who went to school and then ran away and did not come back.” –
School-goer Village C Age 14

“They think that once we leave the village we will have affairs with boys and marry them, so they won’t send us beyond the village to study.” School goer Village C Age 15

These accounts of adolescents in Gujarat contrast with the experiences of the Champions in Maharashtra who were empowered to push through these limiting gender norms (including the expectations regarding home based work and marriage).

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“...Eleventh standard just passed by soon. Now my family started talking about my marriage which affected me somewhat. But after a few days my family dropped the idea and agreed to let me continue to study. Soon I was in my twelfth standard and I also had the benefit of attending tuition for the same. I managed to clear my exams and that really made my family feel happier. They agreed to let me study further...” Champions 6- Age 20

“...My mother is willing to bear any amount of pains/difficulties for my education. My father too inspires me a lot. He tells me to fill this form or the other so that I will get a job. Then he feels that I can stand up on my own feet and that will reduce his worries. He has never objected to my education and he has never put any restrictions on my mother....” -Champion 28- Age 19

For participants in the *Champions Project* freedom from early marriage and educational success were associated with ambitious personal aspirations. Participants' aspirations diverged significantly from those of their families and peers. 92 percent planned to work outside the home after graduating (and 87 percent after marriage). This is particularly striking as 59 percent of participants mothers were homemakers. Those mothers who did work were primarily engaged in low skill occupations, including agriculture labor (46 percent) and domestic service (26 percent). In fact in the State of Maharashtra only 31 percent of women are formally employed outside the home.

Conclusion

Though the far-reaching benefits of education are widely accepted, particularly in a technological age with a shrinking traditional job market, the challenge of realizing an equitable system against a developing world backdrop of pervasive early marriage, growing inequalities, gender discrimination, entrenched social hierarchies and considerable resource constraints, remains unresolved. Data from the FXB studies clearly show the continuing close correlation between early marriage and educational disadvantage. In Gujarat the evidence suggests that without stronger incentives to enhance the importance of respect for young girls' right to education, and without tangible material benefits resulting from education, child marriage will continue to be a default choice for poor parents intent on safeguarding their children, and particularly their daughters' future. *The Champions Project* in Maharashtra illustrates the social, economic and psychological advantages that flow from delaying marriage in the interest of educational advancement.

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