

# Knot Ready

LESSONS FROM INDIA ON DELAYING MARRIAGE FOR GIRLS

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# Knot Ready

## LESSONS FROM INDIA ON DELAYING MARRIAGE FOR GIRLS

Research over the past decade has focused on the prevalence, causes and negative consequences of child marriage. ICRW's Knot Ready project is among the first to systematically examine the solutions to this problem: What are the program and policy interventions that have tried to reduce child marriage and to what extent have they been successful? This study reviews evidence from national survey data and a range of policies and programs to assess change on child marriage in India. As awareness of the detriments of child marriage grows, the opportunity is ripe for programs, policy-makers and researchers to use these findings to make a significant difference in changing norms and behavior around child marriage in South Asia and other regions of the world.

### KNOT READY'S RESEARCH APPROACH

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The Knot Ready study was conducted in India from 2005 through 2008. ICRW researchers analyzed child marriage trends in the sub-continent over the past 15 years and assessed the effectiveness of programs and policies aimed at delaying age at marriage. The project identified legislation and 58 policy and program interventions to delay age at marriage in India from 1961 through 2005. Among these, the project identified 10 governmental and nongovernmental interventions with the explicit objective of delaying age at marriage. Researchers conducted in-depth field assessments of eight interventions and a detailed document-based assessment of the other two.

### KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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- 1. In India, child marriage has declined modestly over the last 15 years. While the gap between urban and rural areas remains stark, several states show promising trends.** Data analysis of three National Family Health Surveys from 1992-1993 to 2005-2006 shows an increase of only 0.4 years in the mean age at marriage, from 16.7 years to 17.1 years. The urban-rural differential over the 15 years remains substantial: Rural girls marry younger than 18 at nearly twice the rate of urban girls. However, more detailed analysis reveals some promising trends: Several states with high child marriage rates showed significant declines in women who marry before age 18.
- 2. Education continues to be the single most important predictor of age at marriage over time. Yet, keeping girls in school is a relatively untried programmatic intervention.** Girls who have more education and wealthier families tend to marry later than illiterate and poorer girls. Girls with secondary schooling are approximately 70 percent less likely to marry as children than illiterate girls.

While ICRW analysis and other research identified formal education—particularly at post-primary levels—as the critical factor in delaying age at marriage, researchers found few efforts focused on keeping girls in school. Child marriage prevention programs have emerged largely from a reproductive health framework. Therefore, keeping girls in school is not routinely put forward as a key strategy, despite its enormous potential for impact.

3. **Strong national policies that limit child marriage are undermined by lack of awareness, weak implementation and lax enforcement.** Legislation to prevent child marriage dates from the 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act to the 2006 Prohibition of Child Marriage Act. The government also has programs offering cash incentives to delay age at marriage for girls. However, gaps and loopholes in policies, administrative challenges, and lack of awareness of these policies and programs among both implementers and intended beneficiaries are limiting their effectiveness. The NGO sector offers good programs with interesting ideas that policy-makers can incorporate into cohesive strategies at the state and national levels. Effectively implementing current laws and policies will require a concerted effort to work with communities to change attitudes and norms, not just define enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, the government infrastructure already offers large scale investments such as mandatory schooling and conditional cash transfer programs, which can be more streamlined, targeted and effectively administered to reach desired results.
4. **Promising strategies for delaying child marriage already exist and should be expanded. These strategies include empowering girls, mobilizing communities and influencing key decision makers.** Limited evaluation data inhibits the ability to identify discrete program elements that successfully delay marriage. That said, some promising pathways emerged from the analysis. These strategies include involving key stakeholders (particularly fathers, mothers and religious leaders) in the lives of girls and their communities to effect normative change, and building girls' capacity through formal education and livelihoods training, which enhances their ability to negotiate key life decisions such as when to marry.
5. **Programs with the goal of delaying girls' age at marriage can only be successful by addressing underlying social norms around sexuality and chastity, and reassuring parents about their daughters' safety.** A pervasive fear among families is that their daughters will be sexually violated or become pregnant out of wedlock. Consequently, girls often are married early to avert this potential violation, and they are severely limited in their ability to spend time outside the home. Successful program design will address this underlying fear, ensure safe spaces for girls and gain parental trust.
6. **Lack of effective evaluations means that claims of program success in delaying age at marriage are at best tentative, with one or two exceptions. Investment in more rigorous evaluation is essential for pinpointing what works.** While most of the programs ICRW visited reported that the age at marriage had increased among girls in the targeted areas, the limited number of rigorous evaluations makes several of these claims tentative at best. Donors, researchers and implementing organizations should work together to build rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems that definitively identify, replicate and scale up successful strategies. Donors need to extend funding cycles in ways that acknowledge the longer-term social change required to delay age at marriage.

# Knot Ready

## LESSONS FROM INDIA ON DELAYING MARRIAGE FOR GIRLS

### INTRODUCTION

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Worldwide, more than 60 million women ages 20–24 were married before they reached age 18. Although the extent of child marriage varies substantially between countries, about half of the girls who are affected live in South Asia.<sup>1</sup> Policy-makers, practitioners and researchers increasingly recognize that child marriage<sup>2</sup> can undermine progress toward basic development goals, such as reducing maternal and infant mortality, preventing HIV infection, improving women’s educational and economic status, and ensuring gender equality and human rights.

Though both girls and boys are married as children, child marriage is more common among girls in the developing world. Adolescent boys face pressures to succeed in school, prove their sexuality, engage in sports and physical activity, and demonstrate their ability to shoulder household economic responsibilities. Boys rarely experience pressure to get married. On the other hand, girls’ social identity in many cultures centers on marriage and motherhood. For girls, adolescence is not associated with education, economic opportunities, sports or friendship (Mathur et al. 2003).

Child marriage is usually accompanied by early childbearing, which contributes to high maternal mortality and morbidity. Problems associated with pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death for girls ages 15-19 worldwide (Population Action International 2007). Additionally, girls who marry at an early age have negligible sexual experience and information, no autonomy, and little negotiating power in sexual relations. Their partners often are older and more sexually active, putting young women at greater risk of contracting reproductive and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV (Mathur et al. 2003). Child marriage also is associated with lower educational attainment for girls, limiting their employment opportunities, economic security and productive value to society. All these factors contribute to low levels of decision making in the family, increased vulnerability to violence, and limited access to social and economic resources (Barua and Kurz 2001; Jejeebhoy 1998; Mathur et al. 2003).

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF 2007. Progress for Children: A World Fit for Children. See: [http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress\\_for\\_Children\\_No\\_6\\_revised.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress_for_Children_No_6_revised.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Child marriage is any marriage that occurs before age 18, a standard that is reinforced by a general consensus among various international conventions and human rights agreements (Mathur et al. 2003).

Research over the past decade has focused on the prevalence, causes and consequences of child marriage. Only now are researchers beginning to examine how to change entrenched patterns of child marriage. As a result, documentation and analysis of legislation, policies and programs to address the problem are scarce. ICRW's Knot Ready project aimed to address these gaps by reviewing and analyzing legal, policy and program initiatives to delay age at marriage in India. Because the risks are greater for girls than boys, the analysis focuses only on girls and young women. Given the country's cultural and geographical diversity, India's experiences in combating child marriage will lend useful insight to other countries in South Asia and elsewhere in the developing world.

## CHILD MARRIAGE IN SOUTH ASIA

Despite a rise in the singulate<sup>3</sup> mean age at marriage in several South Asian countries over the last half century, child marriage among girls continues to be a widespread practice. In South Asia, 48 percent of women ages 15-24 are married before 18 (UNICEF 2005). The average age at marriage among females in Nepal is 16 years; more than half of all married women give birth before age 20 (Mathur et al. 2001). In India and Bangladesh, nearly half of all women are married before 18 (Mensch et al. 2005; Chowdhury 2004).

Sri Lanka is an exception. By 1990, the average age at marriage for women was 25 years. This later age is likely due to a cultural heritage of relative gender equality, which contributed to higher levels of education for young girls (Malhotra and Tsui 1996). This contrasts to other countries in the region where unequal gender norms persist.

Child marriage is sustained by factors such as concerns over young girls' chastity and a lower social value of daughters than sons that results in less education and labor force employment for girls compared to boys (Fricke et al. 1986; Mensch 2005; Mathur et al. 2001; Amin et al. 1998; Amin 2008; Islam and Ahmed 1998).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND METHODS

ICRW conducted the Knot Ready project in India from 2005 through 2008. The purpose of the research was to document changes in age at marriage over the past 15 years and examine how programs and policies have and could contribute to reducing child marriage. Activities were organized around three interrelated objectives:

1. National Family Health Survey (NFHS) analysis: Document trends in age at marriage and factors influencing child marriage across India through secondary analysis of NFHS data. This analysis provides the context within which researchers examined policies and programs to delay marriage among girls in India.

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<sup>3</sup> The singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) is a synthetic cohort measure calculated from census or survey data on the proportions of women who are single by five-year age groups, and as such the SMAM estimates are generally higher than the actual median age at marriage.



2. Broad program assessment: Assess the scope and range of legislation, policies and programs designed to delay marriage in India through an extensive review of documents and face-to-face interviews with policy-makers and other stakeholders.
3. Detailed program assessment: Analyze in detail the successes and challenges of 10 strong programs designed to delay marriage in India.

### 1. NFHS analysis

ICRW analyzed quantitative data from three rounds of the nationally representative National Family Health Survey (NFHS). Each round involved the collection of data from about 90,000 women of reproductive age; the sample focused on married women ages 20-24. ICRW calculated levels and trends in age at marriage across India, by state and urban-rural residence from 1992-1993 through 2005-2006. Key factors influencing child marriage and changes in the relative significance of different factors between NFHS-2 (1998-1999) and NFHS-3 (2005-2006) surveys also were examined.

### 2. Broad Program Assessment

Using Web-based searches, communication with colleagues and visits to organizations, ICRW identified key legislation and 58 policy and program interventions to delay marriage in India from 1961 through 2005. Policy and program interventions were classified by their scope (community-based, national, etc.); type of intervention (policy, program, media, etc.); motivation (direct aim to increase age at marriage or subsumed within other program goals); location (state, urban or rural); strategies (education, employment, changing social norms, etc.); and target groups (youth, community leaders, parents, etc.). ICRW also convened more than 20 experts on child marriage to share this initial inventory and obtain more information. Finally, researchers undertook a more intensive search for information available on the Internet, collected additional documents and data from implementing organizations, and collated and analyzed the information.

### 3. Detailed Program Assessments

ICRW conducted a detailed, field-based assessment of eight policy and program interventions implemented by governmental and nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and a detailed, document-based assessment of two additional programs. The primary criterion for selecting the interventions for field assessments was that they have an explicit objective of delaying age at marriage for girls. Researchers collected data via observations of program activities, focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews with key groups and individuals. ICRW conducted a total of 35 in-depth interviews with 12 organization leaders, 16 officials involved in the government-based initiatives, six government field workers and three community leaders. ICRW also held 24 FGDs (with an average of 20 individuals in each group) with project staff (five FGDs), girls and boys in the project communities (six and three FGDs, respectively), and adult women and men (seven and three FGDs, respectively).

ICRW also assessed two interventions that had particularly rigorous evaluation designs and had demonstrated some success in delaying age at marriage for girls by examining their reports and interviewing organizational leaders for insights about their interventions.

## KEY FINDINGS

### NFHS ANALYSIS: MARRIAGE TRENDS AND FACTORS INFLUENCING MARRIAGE IN INDIA

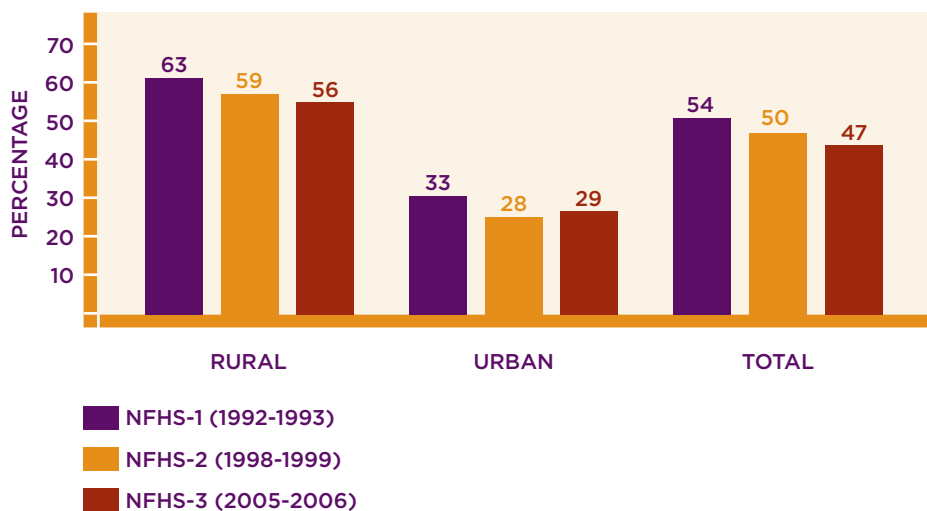
#### 1. In India, child marriage has declined modestly over the last 15 years, and the gap between urban and rural areas remains stark.

The likelihood that girls would marry before age 18 declined only modestly between 1992 and 2006. Data from the three National Family Health Surveys (NFHS-1, 2 and 3) show that the percent of women between 20-24 years of age<sup>4</sup> who had been married before the age of 18 declined from 54 percent in NFHS-1 (1992-1993) to 47 percent in NFHS-3 (2005-2006). This 7 percent decline corresponds to an increase of only 0.4 years in the mean age at marriage in the same time period, from 16.7 years in NFHS-1 to 17.1 years in NFHS-3.

While rural areas do show a somewhat sharper decline in child marriage, the urban-rural differential across all three survey periods from the early 1990s to 2005-2006

FIGURE 1:

#### CHANGES IN THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN, 20-24, MARRYING BELOW 18 BY RURAL OR URBAN RESIDENCE IN INDIA 1992/1993 - 2005/2006



<sup>4</sup> All the analysis for ever-married women in India in this section refers only to the 20-24 years age group. Because large proportions of women in India are married by 20, this cohort presents less of a censoring problem in the inclusion of unmarried women, and most likely captures current marriage norms. Also, older women who were married longer are more likely to make errors while reporting their age at marriage.

remains substantial (Figure 1). In all three surveys, child marriage is far more common in rural than in urban areas. By the time of NFHS-3, about 29 percent of urban married women ages 20-24 had been married before 18, while in rural areas this proportion was still more than half at 56 percent.

## **2. Although regional and state differences persist, there are promising trends in some states where prevalence of child marriage traditionally has been high.**

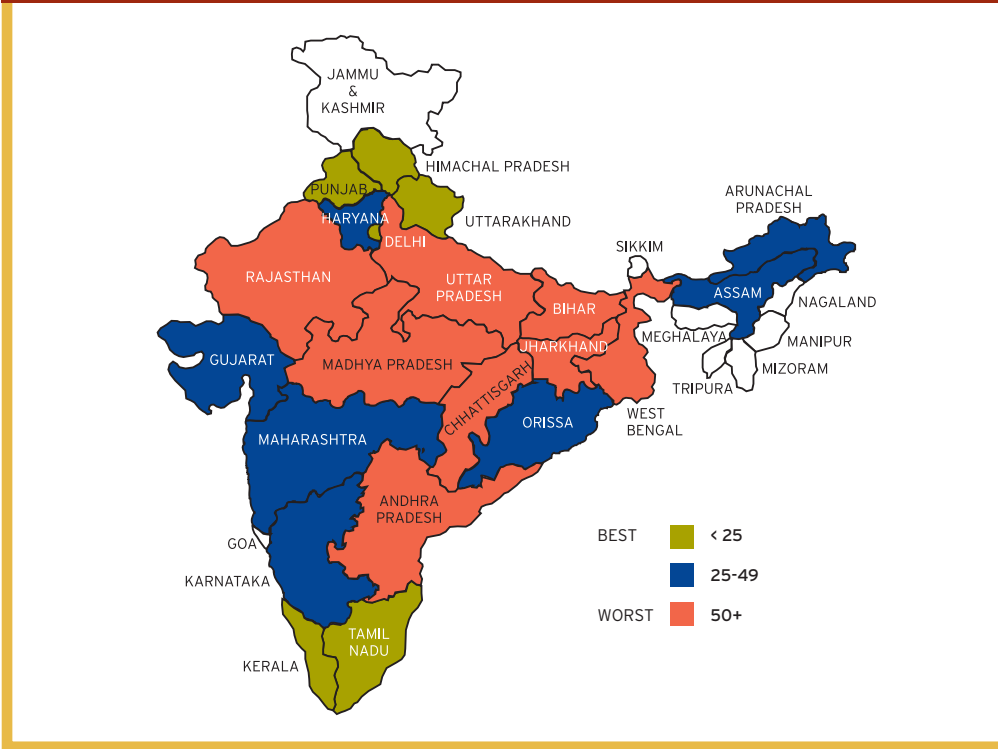
Child marriage prevalence remains high in several states. Map 1 shows the percent of girls married before 18 in NFHS-3. The states are divided into categories of low (less than 25 percent), moderate (25-49 percent) and high (50 percent and higher) levels of child marriage prevalence. Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Uttaranchal all had levels of early marriage below 25 percent. Gujarat, Arunachal Pradesh, Haryana, Orissa, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Assam were categorized as moderate. Child marriage in these states ranged from 33 percent to 41 percent. States with persistently high levels of child marriage were Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. Percentages in these states ranged from 52 percent (Chhattisgarh) to 61 percent (Jharkhand).

It is noteworthy that child marriage prevalence has declined to some extent in virtually all states. In the early 1990s, nine of the 18 states for which data were available in NFHS-1 had 50 percent or higher prevalence of child marriage; five states had prevalence over 60 percent. By 2005-2006, only six of the now 21 states<sup>5</sup> had levels of child marriage over 50 percent; only Bihar and Jharkhand had prevalence higher than 60 percent. In particular, some of the high and moderate prevalence states experienced significant declines. Map 2 illustrates the percentage declines in the prevalence of child marriage by state. Madhya Pradesh (20.3 percent), Haryana (17.5 percent) and Maharashtra (15.1 percent) made particularly large advances in delaying age at marriage, experiencing high declines of more than 15 percent. Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh all showed declines of 10 percent or more over the period. In contrast, Punjab and Gujarat showed minimal change or even slight increases. Shifts at the state level obscure disparities at the district level and between urban and rural areas, making it difficult to assess changes in age at marriage in specific areas. Three new states—Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Uttaranchal—were created from existing states where the distribution of early marriage was uneven, so for these three the levels of decline in early marriage are not possible to take at face value.

<sup>5</sup> Three states—Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Uttaranchal—were created from existing states between NFHS-1 and NFHS-3.

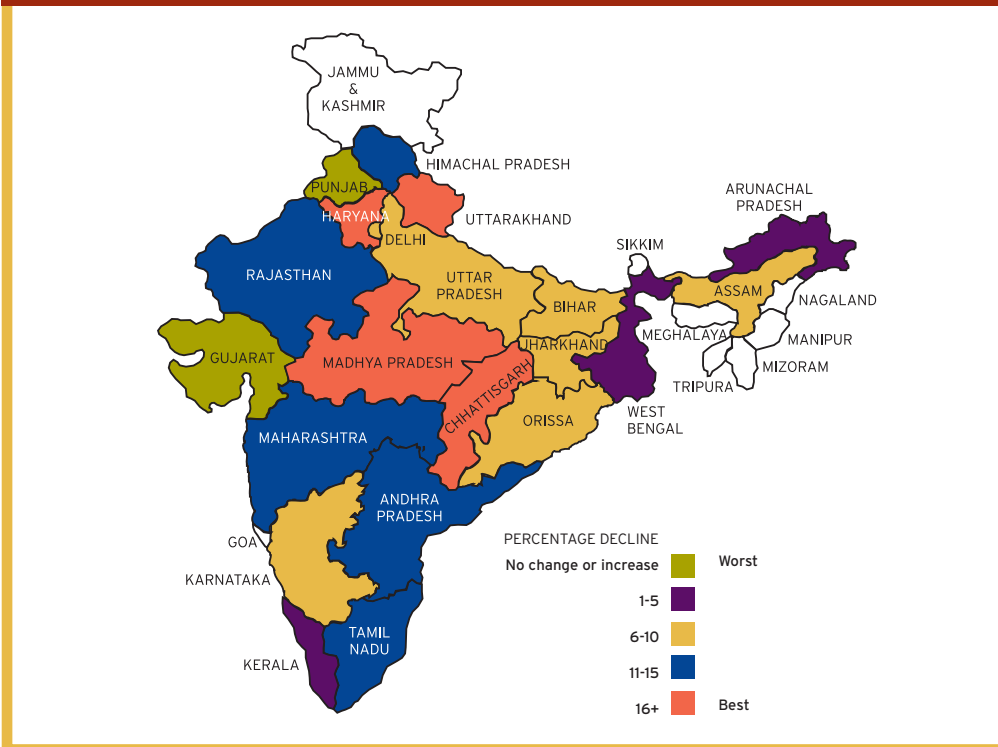
MAP 1:

**PROPORTION OF WOMEN, 20-24, MARRIED UNDER 18 IN 2006**



MAP 2:

**PERCENTAGE DECLINE OF THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN, 20-24, MARRIED UNDER 18 FROM 1992-2006 BY STATE**



**3. Education remains the most consistent predictor of age at marriage. A number of other factors shift in their influence over time.**

Bivariate and multivariate analyses of data from NFHS-2 and NFHS-3 reveal several interesting findings about the factors associated with child marriage. Table 1 presents all of the factors that were analyzed. These are explained in more detail below.

**TABLE 1:**

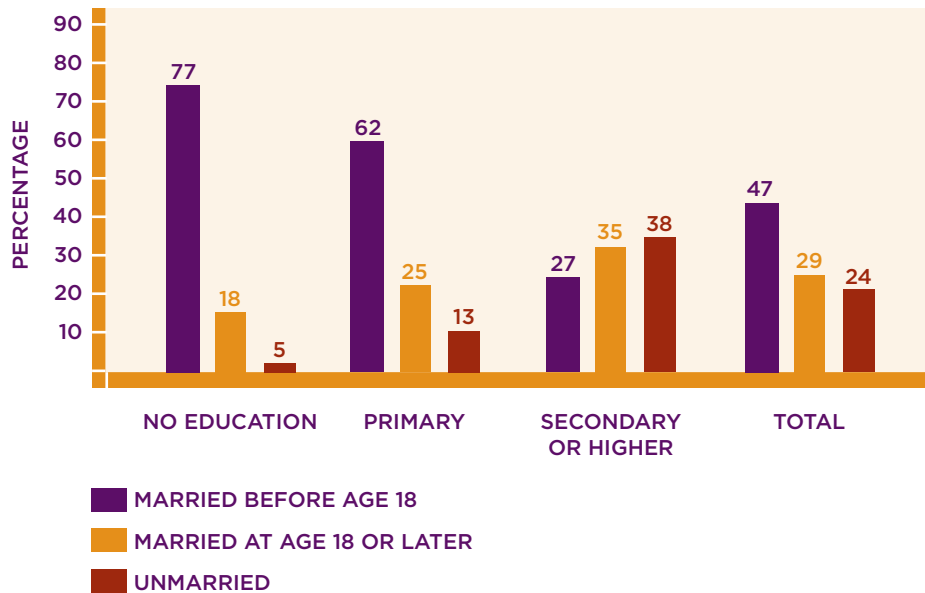
<b>FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CHILD MARRIAGE<sup>†</sup>, NFHS-2 (1998-1999) AND NFHS-3 (2005-2006)</b>				
<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>NFHS-2</b>		<b>NFHS-3</b>	
	<b>Odds Ratio</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Odds Ratio</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>
<b>Urban/Rural Residence</b>				
Rural	1.00		1.00	
Urban	1.05	0.09	.686***	0.04
<b>Respondent's Education</b>				
Illiterate	1.00		1.00	
Primary	.722**	0.10	.706***	0.06
Secondary & Higher	.292***	0.09	.301***	0.05
<b>Husband's Education</b>				
Illiterate	1.00		1.00	
Primary	.878	0.12	.776***	0.06
Secondary & Higher	.536***	0.11	.616***	0.05
<b>Social Caste</b>				
High Caste	1.00		1.00	
Scheduled Caste	1.08	0.10	1.51***	0.05
Scheduled Tribe	1.13	0.15	1.27**	0.07
Other Backward Caste	.961	0.08	1.48***	0.04
<b>Religion</b>				
Other Religions	1.00		1.00	
Hindu	1.75***	0.15	1.73***	0.09
Muslim	2.00***	0.17	1.54***	0.10
<b>Geographic Region</b>				
Central	1.00		1.00	
North	.939	0.12	.812**	0.06
Northeast	.740**	0.14	.864	0.10
East	1.21	0.16	1.11**	0.05
West	.955	0.10	.961	0.06
South	1.07	0.10	.745***	0.05
<b>Standard of Living</b>				
Low	1.00		1.00	
Middle	.822**	0.09	1.19***	0.04
High	.485***	0.11	.782***	0.05
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>5,216</b>		<b>17,255</b>	

<sup>†</sup> Outcome defined as 1 if married before age 18; 0 if married at or after age 18.

\*\*p<.05    \*\*\*p<.001

FIGURE 2:

**AGE AT MARRIAGE AND MARITAL STATUS OF YOUNG WOMEN 20-24 BY EDUCATION IN INDIA 2005/2006**



**Education**

A graphic representation of bivariate differentials by education shows the stark contrast in marriage patterns among the least and most educated women (Figure 2). Nearly 40 percent of women ages 20-24 with post-secondary (higher) education were unmarried, compared to 5 percent of women with no education. Conversely, less than 30 percent of highly educated women married before 18, compared to 77 percent of uneducated young women. In the multivariate logistic analysis, education remained the most important single predictor of age at marriage over the two periods: In both surveys, girls with secondary schooling were approximately 70 percent less likely to marry early than their uneducated counterparts (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup> Secondary education is a much stronger trigger for delaying age at marriage than primary education alone. Husband’s schooling also had a strong effect in reducing the likelihood a girl would marry early, even after controlling for girls’ own education. The effect of the husband’s primary education went from being insignificant in 1998-1999 to highly significant in 2005-2006, that is, educated men were less likely to marry underage girls during this time period.

<sup>6</sup> The results of the multivariate model should be interpreted with some caution. The sample includes ever-married women and thus the data are censored and unable to follow unmarried women who will be married in the future. Nonetheless, the strength of the findings suggests that these factors are important and deserve further consideration in longitudinal or cohort models.

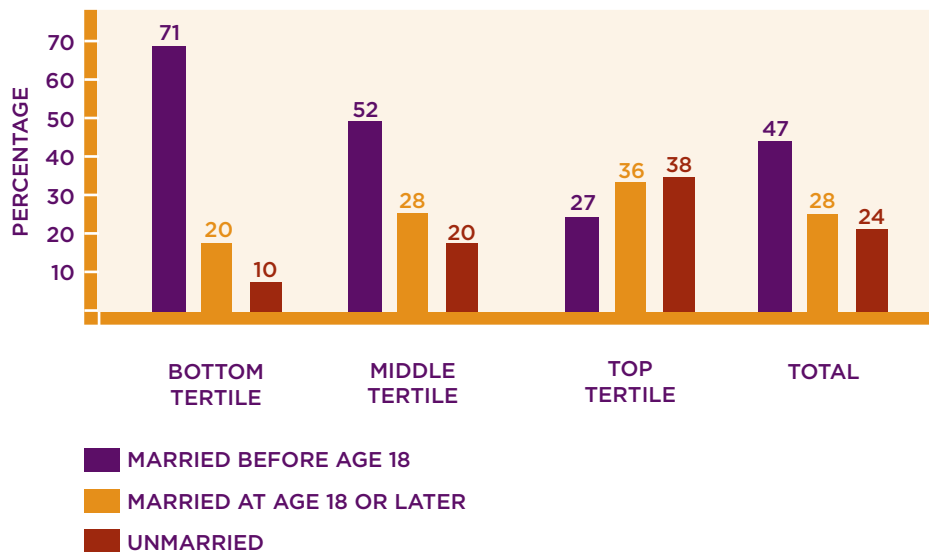
### Standard of Living

In NFHS-2, the standard-of-living measure had significant effects on age at marriage. Women in the “middle” category were 80 percent as likely to marry early compared to women in the “low” category. Women in the “high” category were 50 percent as likely to marry early as compared to women in the “low” category. Several reasons, such as social norms, the economic burden of supporting daughters and dowries that rise with age, are thought to contribute to early marriages among poorer families (Mathur et al. 2003).

In NFHS-3, however, the results are counterintuitive. From 2005-2006, somewhat higher odds of early marriage exist among girls in the “middle” standard-of-living category, and lower odds among girls in the “high” category. These results may reflect the changes that occurred with the standard-of-living measure, which NFHS supplemented with a new measure of wealth. Given the marked change in results, ICRW looked at the new wealth index in NFHS-3, using data on all young women ages 20-24, married and unmarried (Figure 3). These young women were divided into three groups: girls who married before age 18, women who married after age 18, and women who were still unmarried by age 24. Young women from wealthy households are likely to marry later than age 18, making them more likely than girls from poorer households to be unmarried at age 24. Forty-two percent of young women unmarried by age 24 were from the wealthiest households compared to 9 percent from the poorest households. The findings from the analysis using the new wealth index reflect the trend of wealthier girls marrying later than the trends seen in NFHS-2 data analysis.

**FIGURE 3:**

#### AGE AT MARRIAGE AND MARITAL STATUS OF YOUNG WOMEN, 20–24, BY HOUSEHOLD WEALTH IN INDIA 2005/2006



### **Caste**

Controlling for several standard categories of social caste, ICRW finds that caste is a stronger and more significant influence on age at marriage in NFHS-3 compared to NFHS-2. Members of scheduled castes and tribes and other backward castes are between a third and a half more likely as high-caste women to marry before age 18 in 2005-2006. This may indicate that norm shifts occurring among the upper castes are not happening among more disadvantaged groups.

### **Urban vs. rural residence**

Where a girl lived, in an urban or rural residence, became more important in determining age at marriage over time, controlling for other factors. From 1998-1999, living in an urban residence did not significantly reduce a girl's chance of marrying before age 18; by 2005-2006, urban residence significantly reduced these chances.

### **Religious affiliation**

In both NFHS time periods examined, Hindu women were one and three-quarters times more likely to marry before age 18 in contrast to the reference category of "other religions," which includes Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists and others. Muslim women were twice as likely to marry early from 1998-1999 but one and a half times more likely to marry early in 2005-2006, a marked decline.

### **Geographical variation**

The extent of early marriage varies considerably by geography, as noted earlier. Analysis of the effects of geographic region of residence on early marriage used the central region (Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh) as the reference category. Only women in the northeast had significantly lower odds of marrying early in 1998-1999; three-quarters were less likely to marry before 18. In 2005-2006, however, regional variation became more significant. Women in both the north and south were significantly less likely to marry early. Only women in the east were significantly more likely to marry early; their odds increased about 10 percent compared to women from the central states.

### **Education, closely followed by wealth, is the strongest determinant of a woman's age at marriage.**

The data imply that later marriage is the norm only at the upper range of the spectrum of education and wealth. Given that the majority of India's population is not in that upper band, it can be inferred that child marriage continues to be the norm among a large population. For programmers and policy-makers, this trend suggests that though the age at marriage is slowly rising, a lot remains to be done for the majority of girls, particularly in rural areas.



## BROAD PROGRAMMATIC ASSESSMENT: FEATURES OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMS TO DELAY MARRIAGE

### 1. Despite strong laws to prevent child marriage in India, gaps in implementation limit the effectiveness of legislation.

Legislation to prevent child marriage has existed in India even before the country attained independence in 1947. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 set 14 as the legal age at marriage for girls and 18 for boys. In 1978, an amendment raised the age to 18 for girls and 21 for boys. However, the legislation had no effective mechanism for enforcement or accountability.

As a result of intensive legal activism, the Indian Parliament passed the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2006. This act sets punitive measures for both guardians and communities that are directly and indirectly involved in solemnizing child marriage. The law also includes measures for redress by underage girls who are married. Under the law, a girl married before age 18 can nullify the marriage without being considered divorced; the husband must pay maintenance to the girl until her remarriage; and any children born from the marriage are considered legitimate with custody given to the mother. These measures seek to enable a girl to “undo” a marriage by providing financial support and countering the social stigma associated with divorce or an illegitimate child.

To ensure effective execution of the law, all states were asked to issue separate orders to implement this act and appoint child marriage prohibition officers as executors. Still, the law has its limitations: The onus of declaring the marriage void lies with the child or guardians; there are no measures to punish government officials who do not fulfill their duties; and the registration of marriage is not a compulsory precondition.

In the course of its fieldwork, ICRW found other limitations related to the law’s execution. Government officials in various states are largely unaware of the new act, and many communities still do not know that child marriage is illegal. For example, a 2008 study<sup>7</sup> found that only 12 percent of respondents in Uttar Pradesh knew that child marriage was illegal. The same study found high levels of community awareness on the legal age of marriage in some states (86 percent in Rajasthan, 71 percent in Madhya Pradesh), where proactive campaigns to raise awareness may have had some effect. Data from ICRW’s work in Bihar and Jharkhand show that half (57 percent) of the adult community is aware of the legal age of marriage.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Supported by the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, the Center for Social Research (CSR) conducted a status study on child marriage in selected districts of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The study is unpublished. The excerpts cited here are from a media report.

<sup>8</sup> Preliminary results from ICRW’s Development Initiative Supporting Healthy Adolescents (DISHA) project endline survey (2008).

## PROHIBITION OF CHILD MARRIAGE ACT: HOLDING THE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE

The Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) has been at the forefront of legal activism, holding the government accountable and pushing it to close loopholes and facilitate effective implementation of the child marriage law. This network helps to ensure the implementation of the revised 2006 act by filing public interest litigations in different states and the Supreme Court when the original law had been violated, and educating judges, lawyers and public prosecutors on the legal issues of child marriage. HRLN educates NGOs across the country on the provisions of the act and mobilizes them to hold the government accountable for any legal transgression. HRLN also advocates for modifications in the act to remove remaining ambiguities.

### **2. Various national and state policies address the problem of child marriage in the context of broader development goals.**

The government recognizes the intricate relationship of child marriage and several development concerns, and it has addressed the issue through various national and state policies. For example, the 2005 National Plan of Action for Children set a goal to eliminate child marriage by 2010. The 2000 National Population Policy ensures access to reproductive health services and information to adolescents, and calls for enforcement of the 1978 Child Marriage Restraint Act. Other policies focus on determinants of child marriage. For example, the 1968 National Education Policy emphasizes girls' education and introduces family life education in the school curriculum. The 2003 National Youth Policy focuses on the education, training and employment of youth.

The government has tried to translate some of its policy commitments into programs to address child marriage. National development plans set the priorities for most government funds for social development issues. The 11th National Five-Year Plan (2007-2012) has a specific focus on investing in activities to reduce child marriage. The planning commission, which is responsible for developing these plans, is in the process of finalizing the action plan and budget. The National Institute for Public Policy and Child Development (NIPPCD) has been selected as the nodal agency to conduct studies on child marriage and generate awareness on the issue across government agencies, NGOs and academia.

While the intent of these policies is progressive, the translation from paper to action often is not effective. Poor implementation can be attributed to lack of political will, inadequate allocation of resources, the challenge of administering programs at scale, and lack of effective accountability mechanisms and monitoring and evaluation systems. Further, local administrators have a poor understanding or lack the will to execute policy, and communities can be reluctant to challenge entrenched cultural norms. More intensive policy focus on child marriage is relatively recent, and it remains to be seen if political and legislative commitments will translate into effective action.

**3. The government and civil society organizations address child marriage through a wide variety of interventions. The most common focus is on adolescent health and life skills.**

ICRW identified 58 documented interventions (seven policies and 51 programs) working to delay marriage from 1961 through 2005. Of the programs, 17 are government schemes and the rest are nongovernmental initiatives. Fourteen of the 17 government programs cover the entire country and are implemented through the government. The remaining three are state-based programs, and each covers an entire state. Ten of the 17 government programs are primarily implemented by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The nongovernmental programs are concentrated in small pockets in four states with a high prevalence of child marriage: Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The programs are targeted to both urban and rural areas, although rural programs are more dominant (Table 2).

**TABLE 2:**

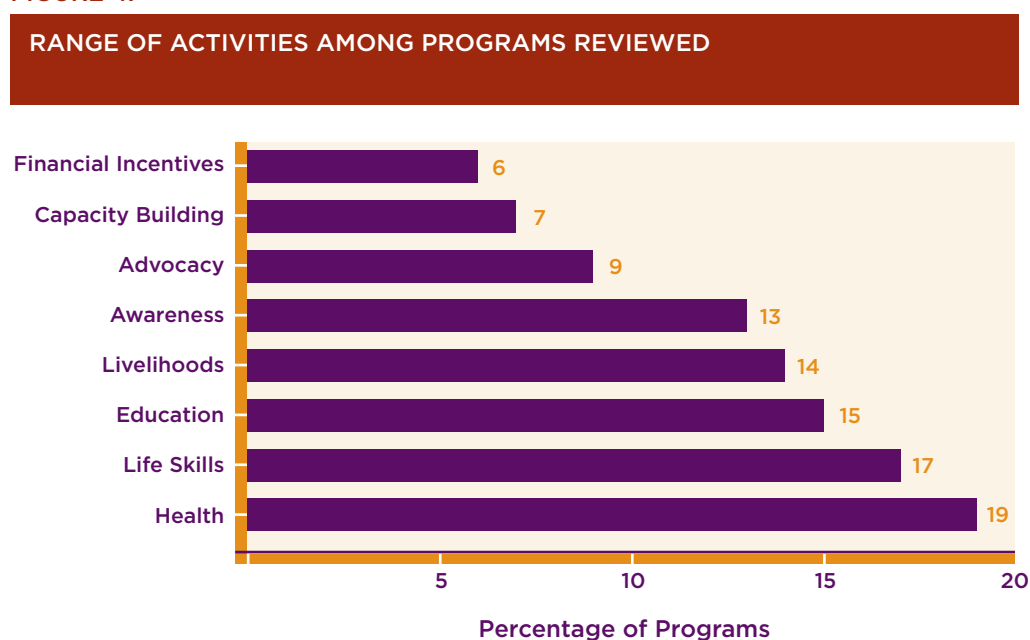
PROGRAMS BY TYPE AND LOCATION		
LOCATION	PROGRAM TYPE (51)	
	Government	Non-Government
Urban	1	7
Rural	4	13
Both	12	12
Unknown	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>34</b>

Programs implement a range of activities focused on health, life skills, education, livelihoods, child marriage awareness campaigns, advocacy, capacity building and financial incentives (Figure 4). Interventions to improve adolescent health (primarily reproductive and sexual health) and adolescent girls' life skills are the most common. Few interventions build capacity of implementing institutions, such as NGOs, government and service providers. One government program provides cash incentives to prevent child marriages. These government initiatives are few in number but have large outreach. The national programs cover all states in the country; state programs cover all districts in that state.

Most programs target adolescents, with outreach to both girls and boys. However, 36 percent of programs also target key decision makers in the lives of youth, including parents, community leaders, legislators and law enforcement personnel (Figure 5). Fifty-four percent of nongovernment programs had more than one target group, while 82 percent of government programs had more than one target group.

Only 18 of the 51 programs directly<sup>9</sup> aim to delay marriage by specifically addressing the underlying causes of child marriage (e.g., lack of information, lack of livelihood opportunities, unsupportive community environment) (Figure 6). The remaining programs have indirect goals for delaying age at marriage, and activities are subsumed within other program and communication strategies and content. Through consultation meetings and follow-up interactions with experts in the field, it became evident that child marriage often emerges as an issue while implementing interventions to improve maternal and child survival. The objective to delay marriage, in many cases, becomes part of broader reproductive health interventions. In recent years, the government’s increasing concern about declining female-male sex ratios and increasing female feticide led to more interventions linking financial incentives with age at marriage (e.g., *Balika Samridhhi Yojana*, *Apni Beti Apna Dhan* and *Ladli*). “Indirect” programs include a CARE intervention in the urban slums of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, to improve the health of women and girls, and government programs focusing on girls’ education or livelihoods.

**FIGURE 4:**



<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this study, “direct programs” were defined as programs that have a specific goal to change age at marriage and build in or design specific activities for this purpose. Change in marriage age is a central objective of program work. “Indirect programs” are defined as programs that indirectly try to change age at marriage through other intervention activities. In these cases, change in age at marriage is an outcome rather than a central objective of program work.

FIGURE 5:

TARGET GROUPS

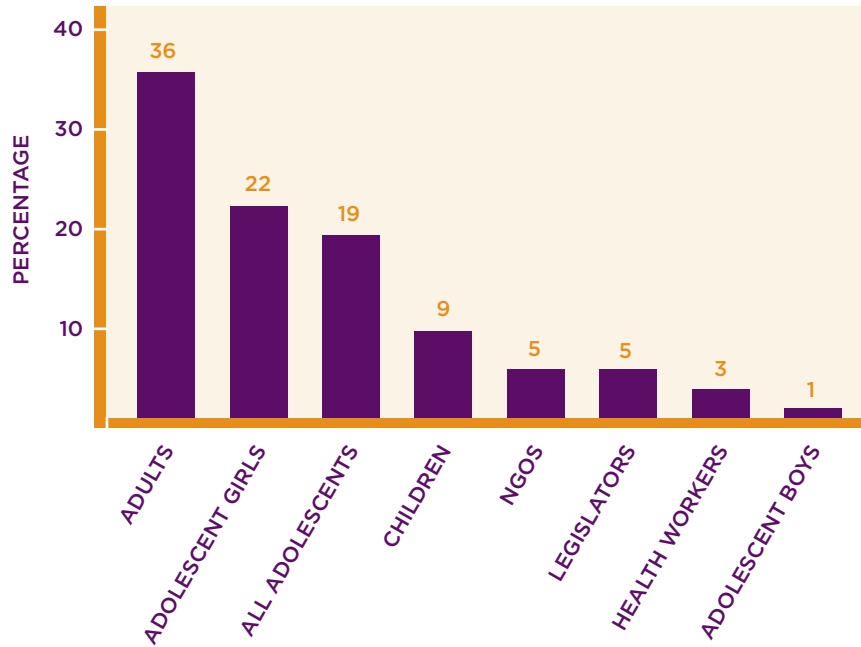
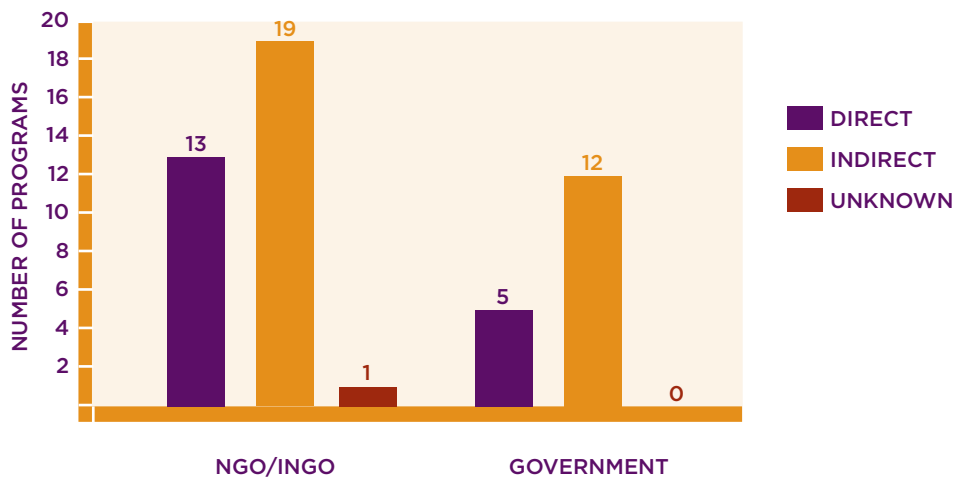


FIGURE 6:

DIRECT VS. INDIRECT PROGRAMS BY IMPLEMENTER TYPE\*



\* Numbers do not add up to 51 because one privately run program was not included in the analysis.

## **DETAILED PROGRAM ASSESSMENTS: IMPLEMENTATION AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SELECTED PROGRAMS**

ICRW conducted detailed assessments of 10 programs with an explicit objective of delaying age at marriage for girls. Table 3 (p. 19) highlights the key program features. The findings from this analysis are presented below.

### **1. Claims of program success in delaying age at marriage are tentative at best due to the lack of effective evaluations.**

Most of the programs ICRW visited reported that the age at marriage had increased among girls in the targeted areas. The basis for this assessment included evaluation studies, monitoring data and anecdotal reports. Many staff reported that their programs resulted in an increased awareness of the legal age of marriage, while several others reported that adults in the community support delaying age at marriage. Some also reported shifts in girls' perceptions and knowledge on the issue, indicating that these interventions have set the stage for positive change in their communities.

The limited number of rigorous evaluations, however, makes several of these claims tentative at best. This limitation also makes it difficult to identify any single factor that stops parents from marrying their daughters before 18. Government initiatives focus mainly on output data and have few, if any, evaluations. Most NGOs have limited funds and invest in community-based work rather than building in rigorous evaluation designs. Program evaluations usually combine project monitoring data, anecdotal evidence, process documentation and an occasional end-of-project survey.

For those interventions with more rigorous evaluations and positive outcomes, definitive claims are difficult because of the relatively short time frame of interventions coupled with an overall decline in early marriage resulting from broader social and economic changes. Moreover, given the broad-based strategies of some of these programs, it is difficult to attribute outcomes to specific strategies and activities within the program. For example, the Institute for Health Management Pachod's (IHMP) life skills program evaluation showed that participating girls marry later. It is difficult to determine whether this outcome is the result of what they learned through the intervention or simply due to the fact that they were unavailable to marry for the one-year period that they participated. Program managers suggest that the delay in marriage is likely a combination of both effects (Pande et al. 2006). That said, the evidence from these interventions does suggest potential pathways to address the issue.

### **2. Most programs recognize the need to involve a range of stakeholders, and this engagement is an important factor in effective implementation and potential success.**

The ICRW field visits and qualitative data point to a number of key stakeholders whose involvement is important to the success of programs seeking to delay age at marriage. One of the greatest achievements of the Action Approach

for Reduction of Early Marriage and Early Pregnancy (EMEP) program is involving religious leaders, particularly the maulvis, or Muslim clerics. The program motivated maulvis to preach messages on the issue to the community after the Friday prayer. A senior maulvi told ICRW's team that the Quran forbids marriage of nabalik, or underage girls. Because the Quran does not specify an actual age, they defined it for their community as 18 years, in line with Indian and international laws. These messages had strong recall and acceptance in the community.

Mothers also can be strong allies. Across programs, mothers supported their daughters by getting involved in programs to access information and skills. In EMEP's program, mothers came to realize the negative effects of child marriage. According to one mother, "We have suffered our whole lives because we did not know any better, because our mothers did not know any better. We don't want the same to happen to our daughters. They have a right to live." In the Development Initiative Supporting Healthy Adolescents (DISHA) program, mothers supported their daughters' participation in the program as contraceptive depot holders designated to offer contraceptives and counseling to other youth. Some mothers in Bihar said that the only route to delaying childbearing (to ensure safe motherhood for their daughters) is by delaying age at marriage. These women believed they could exercise some control over when their daughters marry, but could not influence the timing of childbearing once daughters marry and leave their natal family.

The results from programs working with men and boys are more ambiguous. In some studies, fathers and brothers supported early marriage for girls as part of their duty to "protect the virtue" of their women. These reactions are typical in the more patriarchal states like Rajasthan, Haryana and Bihar. In the DISHA and RISHTA (Regional Initiative for Safe Sexual Health by Today's Adolescents) projects, where girls and boys are trained as peer educators who advocate for later marriages, boys are strong supporters of delaying age at marriage for the sake of girls' own preferences and well-being. In IHMP's life skills program, fathers are more actively involved in the curriculum than the mothers (Pande et al. 2006). Involving men and boys in programs can be challenging and the full effect of that involvement on increasing age at marriage remains unclear. Still, the DISHA, RISHTA and IHMP programs suggest that these efforts are worthwhile given men's and boys' strong influence over marriage decisions.

### **3. Life skills programs give girls greater agency.**

Across all programs, girls say they want to marry later and with men of their choice. Some girls want to continue their education; some want to learn skills to enhance livelihood potential; and some want to delay "getting scolded and beaten by in-laws." Girls who participated in programs that focus on empowerment through information and skills, such as the life skills programs run by IHMP, demonstrate strong skills in articulating, negotiating and making decisions. Even programs that focus on reproductive health but include a life skills module, like EMEP, DISHA and RISHTA, find that girls take seriously training on negotiation, leadership and communication, and they use these skills to negotiate with parents to delay marriage.

#### **4. Few programs focus on keeping girls in school to delay age at marriage.**

Among the programs that conducted evaluation studies, all show that low education is significantly associated with lower age at marriage. For example, the Promoting Change in Reproductive Behavior in Bihar (PRACHAR) program found that girls who are more educated also are more articulate and better able to negotiate with their parents to delay marriage. EMEP and DISHA report similar results. These findings corroborate results from NFHS analysis discussed earlier in this report. Despite the importance of formal education, few programs undertook specific activities to foster school enrollment. The exception was one partner organization in the DISHA program, which undertook a campaign to send girls to school as an alternative to marriage.

#### **5. Parents and program implementers are reluctant to challenge the social norms associated with chastity and sexuality that underlie child marriage.**

ICRW's fieldwork suggests that even when parents want to delay marriage for their daughters, they find it difficult to resist social pressures. "How will I explain [a decision to delay marrying my daughter] to my relatives and other people in the community?" asked a man interviewed in the RISHTA field area. One of the greatest fears relates to the possibility of premarital sex, an unmarried daughter who then becomes pregnant and the subsequent social scandal. A woman sarpanch (elected official) explained that even elected leaders cannot address or oppose the "public shame of an unmarried girl becoming pregnant."

Program implementers, who often are from the same or similar community as the program site, also are reluctant to take on the social norms surrounding child marriage for girls. One organization leader said, "When a father turns around and asks me, 'Will you take responsibility for my daughter if something happens to her?' what do I say?" The prevailing fear of premarital sex or sexual molestation suggests that programs to delay age at marriage for girls need to provide safe spaces for these girls. An informant in Rajasthan said that the high level of participation for girls in the Kishori Shakti Yojana (the Girls Empowerment Program) can be attributed in part to the "safe space" provided by the Anganwadi Centers,<sup>10</sup> where the girls come for the training. Staff from the IHMP program in Maharashtra reported similar observations.

#### **6. Conditional cash transfer programs for delaying age at marriage of girls, as currently structured, are difficult to administer. Sustaining community interest in these schemes is challenging.**

National and state governments have focused efforts on conditional cash transfers and similar approaches. One example is the recently announced national Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), a scheme that improves upon Balika Samridhdhi Yojana, which aimed to address discrimination against girls by providing a cash benefit to families on the condition that girls remained unmarried until age 18. The key objective of CCT is to stagger financial incentives to poor families with girls based on four major milestones: (1) birth registration, (2) childhood immunizations, (3) school enrollment and (4) delaying marriage until age 18. In 1994, the Haryana state government

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<sup>10</sup> Part of the Government of India's Integrated Child Development Scheme at the village level.



launched India's first cash incentive program, Apni Beti Apna Dhan. Administering these national and state financial incentive programs has its challenges, specifically tracking beneficiaries from birth to 18, ensuring that they remain unmarried and disbursing the money. It also is difficult for families to stay motivated for such a remote benefit. While trying to design a cash incentive program linked to education, the government of Uttar Pradesh recently faced immense challenges in mobilizing communities to send their girls to school, preventing drop out, and ensuring mobility and safety for girls. On the whole, the impact of such programs is unknown because the girls who were born at the time these programs started have not yet turned 18.

**TABLE 3:**

**KEY FEATURES OF PROGRAMS SELECTED FOR IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS**

**ACTION APPROACH FOR REDUCTION OF EARLY MARRIAGE AND EARLY PREGNANCY (EMEP), 2002-2005 (PHASE I)**

**KEY STRATEGIES:** Youth reproductive health information; community mobilization; involvement of young people.

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:**

- (1) Religious leaders motivated and proactive to delay marriage
- (2) Increased support among adults for later marriage
- (3) Increased knowledge of legal age of marriage among youth and adults
- (4) Incidences of later marriages reported

*Data sources: Project documentation; Knot Ready discussions and interviews with organizational staff and community\*\**

**EVALUATION:** Project documentation and baseline needs assessment conducted in Phase I. At the end of Phase I a small assessment was conducted and the findings were incorporated in the design of Phase II. Phase II was in progress during the time of this study. The evaluation designed at the end of Phase II will cover the whole project period of five years (both phases).

*Program implemented by Mamta-Health Institute for Mother and Child in selected districts of Rajasthan*

**ADVOCACY INITIATIVES ON CHILD MARRIAGE RESTRAINT ACT, 1989-PRESENT**

**KEY STRATEGIES:** Legal recourse; advocacy and legal awareness to improve legislation to ban child marriage.

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:** Enactment of the Prevention of Child Marriage Act 2006

*Data sources: The Gazette of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, New Delhi, January 2007, available in government offices.*

**EVALUATION:** Legislation is the marker of success.

*Program implemented by Human Rights Law Network throughout India*

**APNI BETI APNA DHAN (ABAD), 1994-2005**

**KEY STRATEGIES:** First conditional cash transfer scheme in India to improve the value of the girl child: payable to unmarried 18-year-old girls.

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:**

- (1) Beneficiaries registered, bank accounts opened
- (2) Beneficiaries not yet 18, so benefits not yet disbursed and impact on age at marriage unknown
- (3) Increased knowledge about legal age of marriage among community\*\*\*
- (4) Communities unaware and/or skeptical of getting cash benefit\*\*

*Data sources: Department of Women and Child annual reports, Government of Haryana; Mid-term evaluation by TNS MODE\*\*\*; Knot Ready discussions and interviews with government officials and community\*\**

**EVALUATION:** Mid-term evaluation by TNS MODE 1998-99 focusing on impact of the scheme on status of girl and mother, including improved potential for health care, girls' schooling, delayed marriage.

*Program implemented by the Government of Haryana in the state of Haryana*

...continued

TABLE 3 (continued):

KEY FEATURES OF PROGRAMS SELECTED FOR IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

BALIKA SAMRIDHDHI YOJANA, 1997–2004

**KEY STRATEGIES:** Cash transfers for delayed marriage (payable to unmarried 18-year-old girls).

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:**

- (1) Beneficiaries registered and bank accounts opened
- (2) Beneficiaries not yet 18 and therefore not eligible to get cash benefit; so impact on age at marriage unknown
- (3) Uneven use of funds by states for the program\*\*
- (4) Communities unaware and skeptical of getting benefit\*\*

*Data sources: Annual Reports of the Dept. of Women and Child; Knot Ready discussions, interviews with govt. officials and community\*\**

**EVALUATION:** Financial utilization certificates were the monitoring tool—to monitor disbursements of funds in the states for the beneficiaries.

*Program implemented by the Government of India throughout India*

DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE FOR SUPPORTING HEALTHY ADOLESCENTS (DISHA), 2004–2007

**KEY STRATEGIES:** Access to reproductive health information and life skills education; youth-friendly reproductive health services; livelihoods training by male and female youth; community mobilization.

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:**

- (1) Increased age at marriage for girls from 15.9 years to 17.9 years
- (2) Increase in knowledge of legal age of marriage from 25.6% of adults to 56.6%
- (3) Increase in age 18 or older as 'ideal age' of marriage articulated by girls from 60.2% to 86.6%

*Data source: Preliminary evaluation results from pre-post, quasi-experimental intervention study*

**EVALUATION:** Pre-post quasi experimental study.

*Program implemented by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in Bihar & Jharkhand*

KISHORI SHAKTI YOJANA (KSY), 2000–PRESENT

**KEY STRATEGIES:** 6-month vocational and home-based skills building program at community centers for out-of-school, poor adolescent girls.

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:**

- (1) Data on delayed marriage, knowledge of legal marriage age unknown
- (2) Creation of "safe spaces" for unmarried girls, diffusing parents' fears about premarital pregnancy and generating their support for the program\*\*

*Data sources: Department of Women and Child annual reports (only district coverage and budget outlay data available); Knot Ready discussions, interviews with government officials and community\*\**

**EVALUATION:** Monitoring system is present in the form of monthly reporting formats.

*Program implemented by the Government of India throughout India*

...continued

TABLE 3 (continued):

**KEY FEATURES OF PROGRAMS SELECTED FOR IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS**

**LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM TO INCREASE LOW AGE AT MARRIAGE,\* 1997-2005**

**KEY STRATEGIES:** Year-long life skills program for adolescent girls to delay marriage.

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:** Median age at marriage increased by one year.

*Data source: Evaluation report from pre-post, quasi-experimental intervention study*

**EVALUATION:** Pre-post quasi-experimental study.

*Program implemented by the Institute of Health Management-Pachod (IHMP) & ICRW in Maharashtra (selected villages)*

**PROMOTING CHANGE IN REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOR IN BIHAR (PRACHAR),\* 2001-2005**

**KEY STRATEGIES:** Delay childbearing and encourage spacing.

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:** Proportion of adolescent girls who married before age 18 declined from 88% in 2002 to 61% in 2005 to 49% in 2007

*Data source: Information from Pathfinder staff about findings from the evaluation of their pre-post, quasi-experimental study*

**EVALUATION:** Pre-post quasi experimental study.

*Program implemented by Pathfinder in selected districts in Bihar*

**REGIONAL INITIATIVE FOR SAFE SEXUAL HEALTH BY TODAY'S ADOLESCENTS (RISHTA), 2004-2007**

**KEY STRATEGIES:** Behavior change communication; capacity building of NGOs; networking and advocacy to promote adolescent reproductive health.

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:** Youth and adults increased knowledge of legal marriage age

- (1) Community support for delayed marriage increased
- (2) Incidences of later marriages reported

*Data sources: Project documents; Knot Ready discussions and interviews with organizational staff and community\*\**

**EVALUATION:** Project documentation. Pre-post study design, but evaluation not done at the time of this study.

*Program implemented by Tata Steel Rural Development Society (TSRDS) in Jharkhand (East Singhbhum)*

**SPECIAL INITIATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENT OF RAJASTHAN TO DELAY MARRIAGE, 1984-PRESENT**

**KEY STRATEGIES:** Coordinated effort to stop child marriage on Akha Teej—the traditional day for such marriages—through police action, awareness campaigns (involvement of various departments such as women and child development, district administration, police, education etc.).

**KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES:** Greater awareness among officials and communities about child marriage\*\*

*Data sources: Department of Women and Child annual reports, Government of Rajasthan Knot Ready discussions, interviews with govt. officials and community\*\**

**EVALUATION:** Project monitoring systems exist in the form of monthly reporting formats; housed in individual departments

*Program implemented by the Government of Rajasthan in the state of Rajasthan*

\*No field assessments were undertaken for these projects.

\*\* These findings are based on anecdotal discussions and in-depth interviews from the Knot Ready study and are not based any rigorous comprehensive evaluation.

\*\*\* These findings are from TNS MODE's evaluation of the Apni Beti Apna Dhan scheme.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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ICRW's analysis shows that age at marriage has increased modestly in India over the last 15 years, particularly in some rural areas. While this is promising, in most of India the mean age at marriage for girls is still below the legal age of 18. Although rigorous evidence of impact is limited, ICRW's review of policies and programs shows a number of important insights and lessons learned. The overall review provides six strong recommendations for future efforts to delay marriage pertaining to: 1) programmatic options; 2) research evidence base, and 3) next steps for policy-makers.

### PROGRAMMATIC OPTIONS FOR DELAYING AGE AT MARRIAGE

#### **1. Three viable strategies to trigger broad normative change to delay age at marriage are to empower girls, mobilize communities and influence key decision makers.**

The ICRW program analysis revealed that providing girls with information, opportunities and life options fosters their aspirations beyond early marriage and childbearing, and increases their agency to negotiate key decisions with their parents. That said, it is not sufficient to focus on girls' empowerment without working to remove other obstacles. Our study confirms the need to involve adults and communities. Religious leaders can play an especially important role because they are directly involved in many weddings, often mediate and communicate with families of young men and women, and have influential views on marriage.

Working with other key decision makers for girls, such as parents, to provide support in changing norms around marriage also is essential. Fathers' support is crucial. As mothers often say, "It is ultimately her father who will make the decision about her." While fathers are willing to support their daughters' participation in short intervention programs within the village, they are less likely to support delaying age at marriage. Thus, strategies that target fathers are needed. Strong media campaigns may influence fathers and other key adults, and help create a more supportive environment.

#### **2. Keeping girls in school stands out as a promising but relatively untried approach to delaying age at marriage.**

Keeping girls in school and expanding economic opportunities for them once they have left school is fundamental to any effort to delay marriage. ICRW's analysis and other research identified formal education—particularly at post-primary levels—as the crucial factor in delaying age at marriage. Yet few efforts focus on keeping girls in school. Child marriage prevention programs have emerged largely from a reproductive health framework. Therefore, keeping girls in school is not routinely put forward as a key strategy. To facilitate this goal, schools should be safe, relevant

and more accessible to girls, particularly in rural areas. Curricula may need to be altered to prepare girls for employment opportunities. Further, schooling must adapt a schedule that considers the household demands placed on girls.

Formal education is a government responsibility, therefore government bodies must strive to effectively meet the challenge of improving girls' retention rates. Government departments should join forces to address the issue, which can no longer remain an isolated domain within the departments of health, education, and women and child development. The government could integrate broader poverty alleviation efforts into education policy. The recently instituted National Conditional Cash Transfer Program, which will link cash transfers to families that enroll their daughters in school and delay marriage, is a promising step.

Registering girls and ensuring their school attendance—not just enrollment—is another specific opportunity for collaboration between government and civil society. NGOs play a key role in mobilizing communities to send girls to school and in creating community support for government efforts.

### **3. NGOs and the government must work together to ensure girls' safety and access to programs and services that empower them.**

Numerous programs exist to empower girls by developing their skills, increasing their schooling, improving their health, and providing safe spaces in which to develop social networks with their peers. These programs should be expanded. The challenge, however, is to increase girls' access to these programs. Families fear that their daughters will be sexually violated or become pregnant if they are not married. Thus, girls are constrained in their ability to spend time outside the home. To increase girls' participation, programs must ensure girls' safety and convince parents, particularly fathers, that program locations are safe. The government should incorporate measures to ensure girls' safety in its education planning. These measures could include schools that are in or near villages, increased and safer transport, and better law enforcement.

## **STRENGTHENING THE EVIDENCE BASE ON WHAT WORKS TO DELAY MARRIAGE**

### **4. Donors, researchers and implementing organizations can all work to prioritize better evaluation of programs to delay age at marriage.**

In many cases, programmatic efforts to delay marriage are in a nascent stage. Few programs have effective evaluations, and much is unknown about the best ways to delay age at marriage. More data on what works best to reduce child marriage is needed. Donors, researchers and implementing organizations all have roles to play. Building rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems is essential for identifying and disseminating what works in delaying age at marriage for girls.

Donors increasingly emphasize evaluation as part of implementation, which helps build greater commitment to and capacity in evaluation. This is a trend that must continue because donors can shape demand for evaluation from their grantees. Donors, implementers and researchers can come together to design interventions and evaluations that identify best practices for future scale-up and replication. Cost-benefit analysis designs could provide much-needed information on the cost to scale up a successful intervention, and what a programmer or policy-maker could hope to achieve through this investment. Designing cohort studies also may be a useful way to assess whether and to what extent interventions succeed in delaying age at marriage.

At the same time, NGOs face huge challenges in undertaking evaluations. Most NGOs are structured for implementation, not monitoring and evaluation. NGOs often lack the funds, structure, systems or skills to evaluate rigorously the impact of their programs on age at marriage or related outcomes. Small NGOs may lack resources to monitor program implementation for reliable feedback on the processes and challenges of trying to change age at marriage. Strengthening NGO capacity for effective monitoring makes a lot of sense, but it may be best to structure sound partnerships with research organizations to undertake impact evaluations. This division of labor would help keep program NGOs closer to their mission and skills, and provide them with the benefit and credibility of sound results while preserving the independence and integrity of the evaluation process.

#### **5. Longer programming and funding cycles may be needed to adequately demonstrate the effect of programs to delay age at marriage.**

This study reviewed the few rigorous evaluations that exist on delaying age at marriage, and even those were qualified by limited time for implementation and evaluation. Programs designed to delay child marriage fundamentally challenge social norms and it often takes many years to assess their true impact. Given that fact, longer funding cycles may be required to assess child marriage interventions. Many donors have short funding cycles that structure actual interventions to last on average 18-24 months. This period is too short in most cases, particularly because deeply entrenched social and sexual norms fuel child marriage. Moreover, assessing an intervention's outcomes may require tracking girls from the early teens until the early 20s. For short-term interventions, the most realistic and effective evaluation strategy would be to focus on short-term outcomes such as an increase in individuals' and communities' knowledge of the legal age of marriage, or changes in attitudes that could include a girl's personal aspiration to marry later or parental aspirations to marry a daughter later. These outcomes are likely to reflect the potential for change. It also would be instructive to follow a cohort of girls to see whether these short-term outcomes have an impact on age at marriage.

## NEXT STEPS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

### **6. Lessons learned from current programs provide a sufficient foundation for state administrators to develop strategies that improve policy implementation.**

The negative social, health, economic and human rights impact of child marriage has motivated India's government to enact specific programs and allocate funds to end the practice. India's favorable policy environment combined with committed NGO efforts offers great potential to change norms and behavior. The government and programmers need to focus on designing appropriate mechanisms for implementation, monitoring and measuring change.

The ICRW review highlights many government policies and programs that are good but poorly implemented. Government programs are scattered and offer few coherent responses to the problem of child marriage. Given the slow pace of decline in child marriage according to NFHS data, there is an urgency to mobilize policy-makers. NGO programs offer interesting ideas that policy-makers can incorporate into cohesive strategies at the state and national levels. Effectively implementing current laws and policies will require a concerted effort to work with communities to change attitudes and norms, and not just define enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, the government infrastructure already offers large-scale investments, such as mandatory schooling and conditional cash transfer programs, which can be more streamlined, targeted and effectively administered to reach desired results. Creative efforts to cultivate political will and stimulate the development of more coherent strategies now constitute an essential "program" area for delaying child marriage.

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