



# What About Us

An urgent call for  
changing the world  
of married  
adolescent girls



## - The study

Early marriage is one form of violence which affects a vast number of adolescent girls in several parts of the country. The research by Vikalp Sansthan and Tata Institute of Social Sciences explores the experiences and perceptions of early marriage among young married girls, older married women and young men. The study is located in 10 villages of Mavli Block in Udaipur District of Rajasthan State in northern India.

The participants in the research were 218 married girls and young women in two age categories:

- (i) those who were younger than 18 years at the time of the study and
- (ii) those who were 19–24 years old at the time of the study but were married before the age of 18.

In addition, 200 older women (primarily mothers-in-law) who had been child brides were also interviewed in the same households to understand both the role of older women in shaping the experiences of early marriage of the young brides and the changing nature of early marriage.

In addition, a selected sample of 50 young men from the same area were also interviewed using a structured questionnaire to understand the role and experience of young men in the phenomenon of early marriage.

The research brings out the contextual issues, such as caste, tribe and poverty as well as community beliefs, attitudes and practices, and other intersecting social and economic factors that support early marriage. It is hoped that the findings of this study will enable Vikalp Sansthan to deepen, and give appropriate direction to, its interventions in the study area.



# - Interview



## ***Renuka's story covers the everyday lives of the young married girls.***

*Renuka was 17 years old at the time of the interview. She had been married along with her four sisters in a common ceremony when she was 14. She was quick to veil herself when her husband entered the room where the conversation was taking place.*

*Renuka had failed two subjects in her matriculation exam. Failure in school often expedited the move to marriage. After moving to her marital home in Ognakheda village, Renuka's life changed. She had to wear a sari, though she could not drape it herself. She said she could no longer ride her bicycle, explaining, "They would not allow it here."*

*When asked whether her husband was nice to her, she described him as angry sometimes. Her mother-in-law, a stern taskmaster, wanted her to be doing something all the time. Renuka said she was not keen to have children but was aware that she did not have much control over this decision.*

*Renuka said that her father's dream had been for her to "become someone". Yet, he was the one who arranged her marriage. He had told his daughters the common ceremony was the only way he could afford marrying all four of them. Renuka could not go against him, and no one would have listened to her.*



# - Early marriage factors & consequences

## Caste and poverty

The social exclusion of lower castes and tribes was quite stark and apparent. Most families of these communities live in the periphery of the rural communities and they experience deprivation and discrimination regarding access to land, livelihoods, education, health services and employment. More than half of the young bride households belong to disadvantaged Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities and 33 percent belong to Other Backward Classes. Based on ration card ownership, almost half of the households with young brides lived on income below the poverty line. The average age at marriage is the lowest among girls from the Scheduled Tribe communities.

## Communal Marriages and Expenditure

To reduce expenditure, many households married more than one daughter in a single ceremony. The study noted a high level of cases in which several girls were married on the same day in a common ceremony. Around 63 percent of the respondents said that they had been married in a common ceremony along with other siblings. The proportion of young brides who married in common ceremonies with their siblings was the largest among the Other Backward Class households. Many respondents cited the rising expense of marriage and several girl children in the family as the two reasons why younger girl children were married early.

## Unpaid domestic labour

Young men migrate to nearby areas for work. Hence, the demand for women's labor at home emanates from this socioeconomic reality, wherein they are required for all domestic labor, which includes looking after livestock and working the fields as landless laborers. Early marriage facilitates docile and compliant girls who can be trained for the work and curbs their agency to question the heavy burden of work. The study highlights the burden of work experienced by these young girls.



**63%**  
married in  
a common  
ceremony  
along with  
other  
siblings



## Family honor and respect

Early marriage of young girls sustains the “honor” and respectability of their family and caste-based kinships. It takes away the pressure on the natal family to maintain the “sexual purity” of the girls. It also ensures the perpetuation of masculine power and control over women's bodies, sexuality and fertility. Early marriage effectively nips in the bud the capability of young girls to acquire information, become aware and be active agents of control over themselves and their bodies.

## Everyday coercion and violence

Coercion and control within the marital home ensures that they perform all assigned work. Expression of autonomy by some girls or women led to the withdrawal of natal family support. Sometimes, violent crimes against women were justified by surviving relatives and/or the community as the outcome of unprecedented autonomy by young women who acted in non-normative ways. An important aspect of the young brides' lives in the study area was their early initiation into a sexual union, leading to early conception, followed by childbirth. Around 40 percent of the young brides in this study did not have a long engagement prior to their marriage, and 36 percent were engaged for one to three years before marriage. Long engagements did not necessarily provide protection for young brides against sexual unions or violence.

## Living in fear and anxiety

Girls and younger women were unable to speak freely in their marital home, where their conversations with the researchers were heavily supervised. They expressed, however, a range of fears and anxieties around marriage, such as an unspecified sense of dread about the new situation, fear of failing to perform household duties, tyranny of the mother-in-law and loss of their father or a brother due to their death. Older women (mothers and mothers-in-law) articulated fears that were linked to the well-being of their daughters, such as the breaking down of a marriage. Such expressions indicated the relational identities of girls and women, linked to the domestic economy and socially approved age-specific roles and their reluctance to articulate individual preference.



**40%**  
had very short engagement  
&  
**36%**  
1 to 3 years prior to marriage

“Half the young women moving into their marital home by age 16”



69% young married boys said “Sometimes women deserve to be beaten”

## Early sexual union and childbirth

Most often, girls were too young and overwhelmed to exercise any choice in decisions about sexual activity, pregnancy and childbirth. What would be considered statutory rape in another context would be normalized under the guise of “marriage”. Shame, secrecy and taboo surrounding discussion about menstruation, contraception and sexual health also meant that girls proceeded relatively unprepared to their marital home.

**82%**  
young men said

**women should tolerate violence from family members**

## Educational deficit and diminished childhood

A loss of freedom for young girls due to early marriage is evident, with at least half the young women in the study moving into their marital home by age 16. The withdrawal from education was a key concern expressed by the girls; given the opportunity, they would like to go back to school, where they could have access to information, a network of friends and develop greater agency. More than half of the young girls said that they missed going to school and that they missed the games they used to play in school with their friends. But the “fear” of violence and lack of alternate appropriate role models both deterred them from even discussing their aspirations with their marital family.

## Masculine agency

Conceptions of masculinity and exercise of agency by young men were quite apparent in the study. The young men expressed typical notions of masculinity that emphasized their anxieties over the bread winning responsibility for their household. At the same time, they also expressed strong gender discriminatory attitudes toward women in their communities, normalizing violence against women, the privileges of being men and having autonomy to pursue their sexuality through multiple relationships outside of marriage.





# - Recommendations

The study highlighted the deeply entrenched and enmeshed relationship of caste and tribe and social exclusion based on community identity, gender inequality, gender discrimination and violence against adolescent girls in the villages in Mavli Block. The main recommendations are:

- Keeping the diversity of experience of early marriage among the adolescent girls and boys in different villages interventions needs to be contextualized, based on the type of community present, issues of dominance or exclusion and access or lack of access to basic services, like education and health.
- Interventions need to focus on empowering adolescent girls who are already married and living in their marital home and who are the most vulnerable, adolescent girls who are married but living in their natal home and girls who are yet to marry.
- With young boys, the focus should be toward dismantling notions of masculinity, power and violence and enhancing knowledge and self-reflection for gender-equal practices and behaviors.
- Change can only be achieved with sustained and continuous engagement with households, communities and state institutions in a multi-pronged approach: through advocacy, outreach and awareness-related work on prevention of early marriage.

# -Who are we?



A group of youth with a steadfast commitment to creating a society free from gender based violence and discrimination based on equity, peace and justice.

Vikalp strongly believe in working with youth and creating a new generation of agents of change. Vikalp has therefore dedicated itself to articulate the needs and aspirations of youth with integrity, accountability and perseverance.



An institution of excellence in higher education that continually responds to changing social realities through the development and application of knowledge, towards creating a people-centred, ecologically sustainable and just society that promotes and protects dignity, equality, social justice and human rights for all.



Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is a global philanthropic organization that works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.

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