

Investigating the Causes for Low Female Age at Marriage

The Case of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh

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This study on low female age at marriage is aimed at investigating the causes and factors influencing the marginal increase in age at marriage among women from 15.3 years as reported in the National Family Health Survey-1 (1992–93) to 16.1 years in NFHS-3 (2005–06) in undivided Andhra Pradesh. The analysis of the data collected from a sample of 716 households from seven districts of Telangana and of 1,944 households from 10 districts of Andhra Pradesh reveals that the two most important exogenous variables with respect to age at marriage are awareness and education, with education emerging as a key indicator.

1 Introduction

More than 700 million women worldwide were married before the age of 18 years according to a UNICEF report published in 2014 (UNICEF 2014). Of these women, around 42% live in South Asia. The singular mean age at marriage in British India was below 15 years at the time of the 1931 Census, which slowly edged up thereafter. The latest data from Education for All Global Monitoring Report shows that one in eight girls is married by the age of 15 in sub-Saharan Africa and in South and West Asia (*Deccan Chronicle* 2013). According to a UNICEF report, “[a]mong women aged 15–24, 48 per cent were married before the age of 18 in South Asia (9.7 million girls), 42 per cent in Africa, and 29 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean” (UNICEF 2005).

India has had a history of campaigns against child marriages. Several prominent figures who played a significant part in the Indian renaissance in the 19th and 20th centuries took cognisance of the detrimental effect that child marriages had on young girls and took initiatives to counter the problem. In the Telugu country, Kandukuri Veeresalingam, Kandukuri Rajyalakshmi, Unnava Lakshmi Bai, and Gurazada Apparao among others strongly opposed the practice of child marriage in their various works in the early 20th century. In Hyderabad, Begum Sughra Humayun Mirza was a well-known reformer who set up one of the first schools for girls in the city.

While there has been a virtual elimination of pre-pubertal marriages, the problem of adolescent girls marrying immediately after puberty and before they reach the age of 18 persists. The statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau show the prevalence of this practice. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-3 (2005–06), 47% of women aged 20 to 24 years in India were married before the age of 18—53% in rural areas and 30% in urban areas. The baseline data suggests that 2.2% of the total males and 4.1% of the total females at the national level married below the legal age (Census of India 2001). On an average, the difference in age at the time of marriage between males and females is 4.7 years. According to the Census 2001, nearly three lakh girls below the age of 15 years had already given birth to at least one child.

The India 2nd and 3rd NGO Alternative Report on Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (National Alliance of Women 2006) and the 4th and 5th India Alternative Report on CEDAW (National

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Alliance of Women 2014) submitted recommendations for compulsory registration of marriages to check the incidence of child marriage and highlighted the complexity of the issue. The Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in its concluding comments in 2007 recommended that India take up comprehensive, effective, and stringent measures aimed at eliminating child marriages and protection of human rights of the girl child (CEDAW 2007). This concern was comprehensively restated in the CEDAW Committee's concluding observations in 2014, following the consideration of India's 4th and 5th reports in its 58th session:

38 While noting that the implementation of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act has led to a certain decrease in the number of cases of early and forced marriage, the Committee is concerned that the State party's declaration regarding article 16 (2) has not been withdrawn. The Committee also notes with concern the high prevalence of such marriages and that victims of child marriage must file a petition with a court to void the marriage within two years after reaching the age of majority. The Committee is equally concerned at reports that judges often authorize marriages of underage girls based on Muslim personal laws and that no legislation ensuring the registration of all marriages in the State party has been adopted.

39 The Committee urges the State party:

- (a) To speedily enact legislation to require compulsory registration of all marriages and to consider withdrawing its declaration regarding article 16 (2) of the Convention;
- (b) To ensure that the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act is implemented without exception;
- (c) To automatically void all child marriages and ensure that the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act applies also to child brides;
- (d) To strengthen efforts to raise awareness about the prohibition of child marriage and the harmful effects of the practice on the health and education of girls and to effectively investigate, prosecute and punish cases of forced and early marriage. (CEDAW 2014)

Using an intersectional approach and the lens of minority, caste, and tribe status to understand discrimination against the girl child and adolescent girls better, this study investigates the paradoxical decline in women's age at marriage in a stridently developmental state. According to the NFHS-3 (2005–06), Bihar (15.0 years), Rajasthan (15.0 years), Madhya Pradesh (15.9 years), Andhra Pradesh (undivided) (16.1 years), Uttar Pradesh (16.2 years), Jharkhand (16.2 years), and Chhattisgarh (16.4 years) are states where there is the highest incidence of women getting married before the age of 17.

Also, there are urban–rural disparities as well as disparities between socio-religious groups. Despite strong policies and legislations against child marriage, the practice of early marriage has seen a rise in recent years and continues to pose an obstacle to the attainment of constitutional goal of equality for women. Keeping these issues in mind, this study thus attempts: (i) to investigate the causes of low female age at marriage; (ii) to analyse the factors influencing female age at marriage; (iii) to identify the key factors of change that might lead to differences in outcomes.

The practice of marrying girls at a young age is quite common in many parts of India. In the erstwhile undivided Andhra Pradesh too, child marriage persisted despite strong institutional interventions to prevent it. Andhra Pradesh was among the few states, where the age at marriage was found to be very low, that is, 16.1 years as per the NFHS-3 (2005–06). There was

an increase in the median age at marriage in the younger cohort (20–24 years) from 15.9 years of age in the NFHS-1 (1992–93) to 17.6 years in NFHS-3 (2005–06) (an increase of 1.7 years). The difference in the median age at first marriage between the youngest cohort (20–24) and the oldest cohort (45–49) was 2.3 years in the NFHS-2 (1998–99) and 1.8 years in NFHS-3 (2005–06). Although the difference of 1.8 years is smaller than that of 2.3, the individual value in the NFHS-3 (2005–06) is found to be more than that of NFHS-2 (1998–99) (Table 1).

Table 1: Median Age at First Marriage in Andhra Pradesh (Pre-reorganisation)

S No	Current Age*	Median Age at First Marriage		
		NFHS-1 (1992–93)	NFHS-2 (1998–99)	NFHS-3 (2005–06)
1	15–19	–	NC	NC
2	20–24	15.9	16.6	17.6
3	25–29	15.4	15.7	16.2
4	30–34	15.2	15.1	15.7
5	35–39	15.0	15.1	15.5
6	40–44	–	14.4	15.3
7	45–49	14.6**	14.3	15.8
8	20–49	15.3	15.4	16.1

NC: Not calculated because less than 50% of women in the age group 15–19 married by the age 15.

* The current age groups include both never-married and ever-married women.

** Corresponds to the cohort 40–49 in NFHS 1 (1992–93).

Source: IIPS (1995); IIPS and ORC Macro (2000); IIPS and Macro International (2008).

This analysis, based on the different rounds of NFHS, shows that the age has increased from 15.3 in the NFHS-1 (1992–93) to 15.4 in NFHS-2 (1998–99) and ultimately to 16.1 in NFHS-3 (2005–06) in the age cohort of 20 to 49. Although the trend shows a rise, the pace of growth is very slow (if we consider the number of years). As per the NFHS-3 (2005–06) data, 56.2% of women aged 18–29 were first married at age 18 in undivided Andhra Pradesh (62.9% in rural areas and 43.4% in urban areas), which is far above the national figure (45.6%). Since the NFHS-1 (1992–93), however, there has been almost no change in the age at marriage.

2 Research Methodology

2.1 Coverage

Information for this paper has been collected from seven districts of Telangana—Karimnagar, Medak, Adilabad, Khammam, Nalgonda, Mahabubnagar, and Nizamabad and 10 districts of Andhra Pradesh—Srikakulam, Vizianagaram, East Godavari, West Godavari, Guntur, Prakasam, Kadapa, Kurnool, Anantapur, and Chittoor. The districts were selected on the basis of the percentage of women married before the age of 18. From each selected district, two *mandals* have been chosen on the basis of district level consultation with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which collected baseline information about the age at marriage in different mandals in each of the sample districts of both the states for this study. Through this consultation, various issues related to marriage—age at marriage, factors influencing age at marriage and awareness of the people about the institutional mechanisms—were discussed with the NGO partners. Apart from this, the district women and child welfare officers were also consulted for the selection of mandals.

Our target was to achieve a sample of 100 from two gram panchayats in each mandal. Where it was difficult to achieve this sample size in both gram panchayats, the study maintained a flexibility in selecting the number of gram panchayats with a view to obtain a sample of 100. In the present study, the main respondents were the parents. Marriage histories of the past 15 years were collected for analysis through one-page questionnaires. Since the study was conducted in 2013–14, the reference period for collecting marriage histories was between 1998 and 2012.

In order to get the final sample for analysis, the study has gone through two different scientific stages—(i) a census method to identify marriage histories; and (ii) a proportional sampling method to select the samples for the study. In the first stage, through a one-page questionnaire, a census survey was conducted at the gram panchayat level (two gram panchayats in each mandal) of the above-mentioned districts in both states, covering 25,868 households (10,749 households in Telangana and 15,119 in Andhra Pradesh) out of which 13,027 households reported marriages (5,191 households in Telangana and 7,836 households in Andhra Pradesh). Of these, 4,564 households performed marriages of their daughters (1,596 households in Telangana and 2,968 households in Andhra Pradesh) below the age of 18 (between 1998 and 2012). In the second stage, a proportional sampling method was used to select the parents of 716 females (who married between 1998 and 2012) from Telangana and 1,944 from Andhra Pradesh (Table 2).

2.2 Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of (i) a state-level consultation with NGOs to collect baseline information about the age at marriage in different districts of Telangana and Andhra

Table 2: Sample Size in the Study Districts of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh

S No	District	Total Households Visited through One Page Questionnaire for Marriage Histories	Between the Year 1998 and 2012			Sample Size (Parents)
			Households Reporting Marriages	Total Households Reporting Marriage (<18 years)	Households Reporting Female Marriage (<18 Years)	
Telangana						
1	Karimnagar	2,183	1,120	178	178	81
2	Medak	1,220	709	261	257	115
3	Adilabad	1,000	488	194	192	86
4	Khammam	1,641	701	130	129	58
5	Nalgonda	1,813	690	375	372	166
6	Mahabubnagar	1,037	556	188	186	83
7	Nizamabad	1,855	927	286	282	127
	Total	10,749	5,191	1,612	1,596	716
Andhra Pradesh						
1	Srikakulam	1,185	665	187	195	128
2	Vizianagaram	1,016	487	34	33	22
3	East Godavari	1,450	885	227	234	153
4	West Godavari	1,998	616	239	236	155
5	Guntur	2,073	896	321	329	215
6	Prakasam	1,284	868	511	603	394
7	Kadapa	2,000	1,176	449	512	335
8	Kurnool	917	476	158	157	103
9	Anantapur	1,543	820	391	398	261
10	Chittoor	1,653	947	257	271	178
	Total	15,119	7,836	2,774	2,968	1,944

Source: Generated by the authors.

Pradesh; (ii) a field survey; (iii) collection of data from secondary sources like the NFHS, census, various reports on marriage; (iv) discussion with officials in government, non-officials, and local leaders in the study area; and (v) informal discussion with parents and different cohorts of women.

In the undivided Andhra Pradesh, 58.4% of women aged 20–24 years were married as adolescent minors. It was one of the four states with lowest female age at marriage (16.4 years according to NFHS-3 [2005–06]). The period of this study witnessed state reorganisation, therefore the data was segregated for the two states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh respectively. This paper presents the results of the study for both the states. The data has been collected from both the states for two age cohorts—10 to 14 years and 15 to 17 years.

3 Results and Discussions

3.1 Socio-economic Characteristics of Sample Households

Among the total respondents (716 from Telangana and 1,944 from Andhra Pradesh), a large number belonged to Other Backward Classes (OBC). In Telangana, 22.9% of the respondents were from Scheduled Castes (SCs), 17.9% were from Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the rest were Others. Whereas in Andhra Pradesh, 25.9% were from SCs, 11.9% were STs, and the rest were Others. More than 90% of the households were Hindu in both the states; 45.4% of the household heads were illiterate, whereas 60.6% of the spouses were illiterate in Telangana. In Andhra Pradesh, 49.5% of the household heads and 57.7% of their spouses were illiterate.

A large number of respondents in both the states were either agricultural labourers or agriculture was their primary occupation; more than 50% of the respondents in both the states reported incomes between ₹50,001 and ₹1,00,000 per annum. More than 70% of the respondents were from nuclear families, whereas the rest were from joint families. In Telangana,

Table 3: Socio-economic Classification of Respondents

S No	Indicators	Number of Respondents (%)		
		Telangana N = 716	Andhra Pradesh N = 1944	
1	Caste	SC	22.9	25.9
		ST	17.9	11.9
		OBC	55.3	40.0
		Others	03.9	22.2
2	Religion	Hindu	95.0	91.0
		Others	05.0	09.0
3	Status of literacy (Non-literates)	Head of the household	45.4	60.6
		Spouse	49.5	57.7
4	Primary occupation	Agricultural labour	37.6	44.5
		Agriculture	26.5	10.0
5	Income	Up to 50,000	20.0	18.6
		50,001–1,00,000	55.7	51.1
		More than 1,00,001	24.3	30.3
6	Nature of family	Nuclear	73.2	74.1
		Joint	26.8	25.9
7	Type of house	Pucca	38.0	59.0
		Semi-pucca	52.0	29.6
		Kutcha	10.0	11.4

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

52% of the respondents lived in semi-pucca houses, whereas 38% lived in pucca houses. In Andhra Pradesh, more than 50% lived in pucca houses and 29.6% in semi-pucca houses. Rest of the respondents lived in *kutch*a houses (Table 3, p 59).

For the sample as a whole, the mean age at marriage was 15.74 years for Telangana and 16.16 years for Andhra Pradesh. The OBC group of respondents in Telangana have reported a higher age at marriage (15.9 years) than the other three social groups (Others: 15.75 years, SC: 15.5 years and ST: 15.48 years), whereas in Andhra Pradesh it is the Others who reported a higher age (16.26 years) than the remaining three categories of respondents (SC: 16.18 years, ST: 16.10 years and OBC: 16.10 years).

There were no significant differences between religious groups in both the states. In this study, an attempt has been made to compute a Household Asset Index (HAI). The indicators considered for the calculation of HAI were possession of mobile phone, television, fridge, motorcycle, and land. On the basis of the value of the index, the households were classified into three broad categories—high, middle, and low—and an average age at marriage exercise was computed for each category of households. The results show that high HAI respondents performed their daughters' marriages 1.8 years later than the low HAI respondents in Telangana, whereas it was 1.9 years in Andhra Pradesh. The analysis of type of houses and age at marriage revealed that the respondents staying in semi-pucca houses performed marriages at a higher age (15.84) than the other two categories of respondents (pucca: 15.69 and *kutch*a: 15.4) in Telangana. In Andhra Pradesh, a higher age at marriage was found among the residents of *kutch*a houses (15.86 years) (Table 4).

In the present study, respondents from joint families reported that they performed their daughters' marriages very early—31.2% of the respondents in Telangana married off their daughters between 10 and 14 years. In these households, it was also found that there was a general tendency to marry off girls at a younger age, with 68.8% of marriages in these households taking place when the girls were between 15 and 17 years. The situation was somewhat better in the case of nuclear families, with 92% of nuclear family respondents performing their daughters' marriages between 15 and 17 years. In Andhra

Table 4: Age at Marriage and Select Variables

S No	Indicators	Number of Respondents (%)		
		Telangana N = 716 (15.74)	Andhra Pradesh N = 1944 (16.16)	
1	Caste	SC	15.51	16.18
		ST	15.48	16.11
		OBC	15.91	16.10
		Others	15.75	16.26
2	Religion	Hindu	15.75	16.25
		Others	15.55	16.24
3	Type of house	Pucca	15.69	15.70
		Semi-pucca	15.84	15.76
		<i>Kutch</i> a	15.40	15.86
4	Household Asset Index	High	16.50	17.00
		Middle	15.20	16.70
		Low	14.70	15.40

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

Pradesh, the situation was comparatively better than Telangana. Irrespective of the type of families, large numbers of households performed their daughters' marriages between 15 and 17 years. The mean age at marriage was found to be 14.89 years and 16.05 years for joint and nuclear families respectively, that is a difference of 1.16 years in Telangana (Table 5). In Andhra Pradesh, the difference in age at marriage between joint family and nuclear family was almost nil or very negligible.

Table 5: Type of Family and Average Age at Marriage

S No	Type of Family	Age Range (Years)	Telangana		Andhra Pradesh	
			Number	Average Age at Marriage	Number	Average Age at Marriage
1	Joint	10–14	60 (31.2)	12.28	49 (9.7)	13.24
		15–17	132 (68.8)	16.07	454 (90.3)	16.48
		Total	192 (100.0)	14.89	503 (100.0)	16.17
2	Nuclear	10–14	42 (8.0)	13.57	180 (12.5)	13.47
		15–17	482 (92.0)	16.26	1,261 (87.5)	16.54
		Total	524 (100.0)	16.05	1,441 (100.0)	16.16
Total		10–14	102 (14.2)	12.81	229 (11.8)	13.42
		15–17	614 (85.8)	16.22	1,715 (87.2)	16.53
		Total	716 (100.0)	15.74	1,944 (100.0)	16.16

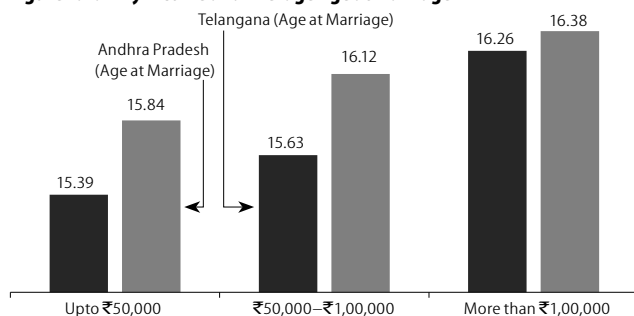
Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

Many reasons are revealed during the informal discussions regarding the variations in the age at marriage between the two different types of families. Of these, the most frequently cited were: (i) lack of sufficient space after the son's marriage; (ii) undesirability for unmarried girls to live under one roof with a newly married couple in a small house.

Out of the total households surveyed, very few were found to be female-headed (8% in Telangana and 6% in Andhra Pradesh). Eighty-five percent of the male-headed households performed their daughters' marriages between 15 and 17 years. This was also seen in 91.2% of the female-headed households in Telangana. In Andhra Pradesh, 86% of the male-headed households performed their daughters' marriages between 15 and 17 years, whereas it was 81% for the female-headed households. While comparing the age at marriage with respect to the two categories of households, it was seen that the male-headed households performed their daughters' marriages at a lower age than female-headed households in both the states.

Interestingly, during the focus group discussion and informal discussions with people, it was observed that the female-headed households in the study villages were primarily households where the male head had died. Although these women were under severe social pressure to perform their daughters' marriage at an early age, there was a reluctance on the part of boys' families to enter into marriage with girls from female-headed households. The higher age at marriage, therefore, in these households could be due to circumstances and not necessarily a choice to marry off their daughters when they were older.

Patriarchal constraints notwithstanding, the age at marriage was higher in families where the decision was taken by mothers (16.03 years in Telangana and 16.8 years in Andhra Pradesh) in comparison to families where the decision-making rested exclusively with fathers (15.55 years in Telangana and 16.1 years in Andhra Pradesh). Again, the outcome in terms of age at marriage is better when both parents took decisions

Figure 1: Family Income and Average Age at Marriage

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

(15.77 years in Telangana and 16.6 years in Andhra Pradesh), when compared with situations where only fathers took decisions. It is evident from the informal discussions with women that because they were aware of problems faced by women during marriage, whenever they had a choice, they did try to delay the marriages of their daughters, keeping in mind other socio-economic conditions. However, the social constraints on women allow them very little autonomy or independence.

3.2 Total Family Income

The economic status of a household influences the mean age at marriage in many ways. The higher income groups are generally associated with better occupations, they can afford to send their children to other villages for higher studies, and they may postpone the marriages of their children. There is a positive relation observed between the age at marriage and the total family income. In this study, among the three categories of income distribution, the highest income category households (possessing income of more than ₹1 lakh per annum) reported higher age at marriage than that of the lowest categories of households (possessing income less than ₹50,000 per annum) in both states (Figure 1).

4 Factors Influencing Age at Marriage

4.1 Education

Education has a direct relationship with all other development indicators. A comparison was attempted between the education status of two generations of women (second generation—the women canvassed in the present study and first generation—mothers of the women canvassed in the present study) and hence their ages at marriage. In the first generation, a large proportion of women (49.5% in Telangana and 57.7% in Andhra Pradesh) were illiterate, whereas only 32.5% in Telangana and 32.2% in Andhra Pradesh of the second generation women were illiterate. Over a period of time, along with educational facilities, a lot of social changes in terms of accessibility to mass media¹ (in both the states) has been observed in the rural areas, and it is possible that this has led to an increased age at marriage (Table 6).

This observation was further cross-checked with another important indicator, which is availability of educational institutions at the village level. The field observations revealed

that the presence of more secondary schools and educational institutions at the village-level motivated parents to send their children to schools. Sometimes availability of government-sponsored programmes like mid-day meal schemes triggered greater interest among the parents. The present study reveals that in villages that have all the three categories of schools the age of marriage is higher (15.96 years in Telangana and 15.86 years in Andhra Pradesh) as compared to villages that do not have schools at all levels. However, the research team also observed a high number of school dropouts during the field visits (446 out of a total of 716 in Telangana and 1,316 out of a total of 1,944 in Andhra Pradesh). Since it is often assumed that dropout rate and age at marriage exhibit an inverse relationship, the age at marriage of female school dropouts was investigated.

Involvement in the paid work to support the family was cited as one of the reasons for dropping out of school (40.6% of cases in Telangana and 38.8% in Andhra Pradesh). The second largest reason was marriage (33.9% in Telangana and 33.3% in Andhra Pradesh). The third reason, particularly important since participating in family labour through care work remains invisible and unaccounted, was taking care of younger siblings—14.3% of women took care of their younger siblings by not going to school in Telangana, whereas the same is 7.7% in Andhra Pradesh. Apart from this, migration was another reason for discontinuation of education among women (Table 7). The analysis of the issue of age at marriage in relation to these indicators is interesting. Participation in paid work and child-care was not found to depress the female age at marriage as much as migration and death of the father. The reason for the inverse relationship between migration and age at marriage needs systematic investigation.

Apart from these above factors, discussions in the course of fieldwork revealed that factors like absence of teachers; gaps in linkages between primary, upper primary, and high school education; lack of proper infrastructure (school buildings,

Table 6: Educational Status and Ages of Marriage of Two Generations (Years)

SNo	Level of Education	Age at Marriage			
		Telangana		Andhra Pradesh	
		1st Generation	2nd Generation	1st Generation	2nd Generation
1	Illiterate	12.52	15.61	16.16	16.96
2	Primary (1–5)	12.70	15.63	16.13	16.63
3	Secondary (6–8)	13.05	15.83	16.08	16.59
4	High (9–12)	13.32	16.19	16.86	17.01
5	Others	–	15.0	–	–

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

Table 7: School Dropouts and Age at Marriage

SNo	Reasons for Discontinuing Schooling	Age at Marriage			
		Telangana		Andhra Pradesh	
		Age at Marriage	No of Respondents	Age at Marriage	No of Respondents
1	Involved in paid work	16.56	181 (40.6)	15.90	511 (38.8)
2	Took care of younger siblings	15.98	64 (14.3)	15.37	101 (7.7)
3	No school in the village	–	–	15.22	32 (2.4)
4	No transport facility to school	–	–	15.01	82 (6.2)
5	Marriage	14.81	151 (33.9)	16.95	438 (33.3)
6	Death of father	14.38	16 (3.6)	–	–
7	Migration	13.38	34 (7.6)	15.0	152 (11.6)
	Total	15.72	446 (100.0)	16.03	1,316 (100.0)

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

furniture, toilets, drinking water, supply of uniforms and unmatched measures of uniforms); negligence of girl child's dignity; low levels of focus on imparting quality education; lack of proper supervision; impact of migration (seasonal) on schoolgoing children; and lack of overall quality education (periodical teachers' training and supply of books) were also responsible for the high dropouts in both the states.²

Our discussion with villagers revealed that the anganwadi system and mid-day meal scheme were not running properly. The food provided through the mid-day meal was of low quality in some districts. There were reports that anganwadi workers were involved in local politics, and that the villagers were not in a position to oppose the malpractices of anganwadi workers. The attendance of anganwadi workers was also reported to be very poor. The selection of self-help groups (SHGs) for cooking mid-day meals was also reportedly lacking in transparency.

Table 8: Awareness and Mean Age at Marriage

S No	Awareness about the Law Regarding the Age at Marriage	Telangana		Andhra Pradesh	
		Number of Respondents	Mean Age at Marriage (Years)	Number of Respondents	Mean Age at Marriage (Years)
1	Yes	274 (38.3)	16.55	626 (32.2)	16.24
2	No	442 (61.7)	15.23	1,318 (67.8)	16.12
	Total	716 (100.0)	15.74	1,944 (100.0)	16.16

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

Table 9: Distribution of Respondents by Awareness of Law with Select Indicators

S No	Particulars Variables	Sub-category	Awareness to Law (Households)	
			Telangana (N=274)	Andhra Pradesh (N=626)
1	Education of the head of the household	Illiterate	90 (32.8)	288 (46.0)
		Literates	184 (67.2)	338 (54.0)
		Total	274 (100.0)	626 (100.0)
2	Education of the spouse	Illiterate	101(36.9)	326 (52.1)
		Literates	173(63.1)	300 (47.9)
		Total	274 (100.0)	626 (100.0)
3	Social group	SC	50 (18.2)	126 (20.1)
		ST	46 (16.8)	27 (4.3)
		OBC	169 (61.7)	269 (43.0)
		Others	09 (3.3)	204 (32.6)
		Total	274 (100.0)	626 (100.0)
4	Total family income (per year)	Up to ₹50,000	54 (19.7)	68 (10.9)
		Above ₹50,000	220 (80.3)	558 (89.1)
		Total	274 (100.0)	626 (100.0)
5	Ownership TV	Yes	214 (78.1)	509(81.3)
		No	60 (21.9)	117(18.7)
		Total	274 (100.0)	626 (100.0)

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

Table 10: Perception about Marriage Age

S No	Perceptions of the Parents about the Best Age for Marriage	Telangana			Andhra Pradesh		
		10-14	15-17	Total	10-14	15-17	Total
1	10-14	—	23(3.7) (100.0)	23 (3.2) (100.0)	1 (0.1) (33.3)	2 (0.1) (77.7)	3 (0.1) (100.0)
2	15-17	22 (21.6) (36.7)	38 (6.2) (63.3)	60 (8.4) (100.0)	6 (2.6) (13.0)	40 (2.3) (87.0)	46 (2.4) (100.0)
3	18 and above	80 (78.4) (12.6)	553 (90.1) (87.4)	633 (88.4) (100.0)	222 (96.9) (11.7)	1,673 (97.6) (88.3)	1,895 (97.5) (100.0)
	Total	102 (100.0) (14.2)	614 (100.0) (85.8)	716 (100.0) (100.0)	229 (100.0) (11.8)	1,715 (100.0) (88.2)	1,944 (100.0) (100.0)

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

4.2 Awareness of Law Regarding Age at Marriage

In Telangana, the numbers of respondents in this study who reported awareness of the legal prohibition of child marriage were 274 and those not aware were 442, whereas in Andhra Pradesh it was 626 and 1,318 for the aware and non-aware respondents respectively. The average age at marriage among families aware about the law was 16.55 years (first group) versus 15.23 years among families not aware about law (second group) in Telangana (Table 8). The figure in Andhra Pradesh was 16.24 years for the first group and 16.12 years for the second group.

More than 65% of the parents were ignorant about the legal age at marriage in India. Only 38.3% of the respondents in Telangana and 36.2% in Andhra Pradesh could correctly identify 18 years as the legal age for marriage for females and 21 years for males. The awareness of law varies by literacy and educational attainment: 67.2% of the literate respondents in Telangana and 54% of the literate respondents in Andhra Pradesh knew about the law during the interview. The same trend has been observed in case of education of the spouse in Telangana, whereas in Andhra Pradesh, illiteracy among the spouses was found to be high (52.1%). The awareness about laws on different issues of women, especially the aspects of marriage, was relatively higher among oBcs than among sc, st, and others. The level of awareness had a direct relation to the income of a household—higher the income, the greater is the awareness (Table 9).

5 Perception about Marriage Age

The study attempted to gather information about people's perception about child marriage and the ideal marriage age of girls. Interestingly, those parents who performed their daughters' marriage at a very early age favoured higher age at marriage. This indicates that although the parents perceived a certain age as proper for marriage, they could not actualise their ideal. Out of the total respondents, 88.4% parents in Telangana and 97.5% in Andhra Pradesh perceived 18 years and more than 18 years as the ideal age of marriage for a girl (Table 10). This needs to be viewed against the fact that only 38.3% of respondents in Telangana and 32.2% respondents in Andhra Pradesh were aware of the legal age of marriage.

However, irrespective of these perceptions, they could not (and did not) actually prevent early marriage of their daughters. Ghose (2011) in his study also found similar results in West Bengal. An informal discussion with fathers/elders in rural Telangana and Andhra Pradesh revealed rigid patriarchal views that linked social status and honour to a daughter's conduct. These ideological/attitudinal factors combine with other material reasons to determine practices like child marriage. It must be clarified here that these are arranged, endogamous marriages and not marriages by choice involving girls below the age of 18.

In Telangana, 40.1% revealed customary practices as the main reason behind marriage of adolescent girls and infant marriage, whereas in Andhra Pradesh

the same was 26.4%. Our state-level consultation of NGOs on this issue revealed the practice of arranging marriages between infants, “cradle marriage,” in some places of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The pressure from elderly people was another important reason. The period between December and May is considered auspicious for conducting marriages. A high incidence of child marriage is found during this time—27.7% of the respondents reported marriages during auspicious occasions in Telangana, whereas 27% of the respondents in Andhra Pradesh performed early marriages to avoid dowry.

Apart from this, people from Telangana perform their daughters' marriages on the occasion of Mahashivratri and during *jatras*. In Andhra Pradesh, the girls get married on auspicious days and during festivals such as Gangamma, Sankranti, Thalupulamma jatra, one day after Diwali, and Malakalapurmi. Apart from this, the practice of *voli*, that is payment of bride price, motivates parents to get their daughters married immediately after attaining puberty. It has been found that sc/st families marry their daughters off before migrating to cities in search of livelihood and survival—12.7% reported migration as the cause of marriage in Telangana. The

fear of sexual assault also led to early marriages in Andhra Pradesh (Table 11).

6 Understanding Decision-making Regarding Marriage

A striking feature inherent in the present study of decision-making behaviour is that not only do parents plan their activities, but a distinct sequence is discernible in their response. The significance of this sequence in relation to household objectives, the way in which strategies are planned to meet these objectives, and the factors which determine the effectiveness of these strategies are the main concerns of this study. In order to examine this idea more carefully, this study has recorded the life course events of the children (Parthasarathy 1987).

The study started with the status of education, that is, whether it was continuing or had been discontinued. The next step was to enquire about the age at completion of education and the reasons for discontinuation. Then their entry into the labour force and finally the process of marriage was examined. On the basis of strategic and focused interviews, the most important and commonly observed sequence that has been observed in the field has been explained in Table 12.

Table 12 shows that average age of attaining puberty is the same in both states. The same has been analysed across different age groups. The study finds that some women discontinued education for various reasons (earlier discussed in detail). The average age at which the women discontinued their education was 15.24 years in Telangana and 15.15 years in Andhra Pradesh.

The next phase of a woman's life cycle is entering paid work—181 women out of 716 in Telangana and 511 out of 1,944 from Andhra Pradesh from the present sample. The average age of engaging in livelihood activities (before marriage) is 14.48 years and 15.90 years in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh respectively. It can be seen from Table 12 that the average time gap between the completion of education/dropout and entering into the labour force is negative in majority of the women. In the area covered by the study, the number of dropouts from school was very significant. However, it was also found that those who were in school did not take their schooling seriously.

The next stage in the life cycle analysis that is based on responses from the field is marriage. Care work and childcare, particularly looking after younger siblings, is not counted as work, although it is cited as a reason for discontinuing education.

Table 11: Reasons for Early Marriage

S No	Reasons for Early Marriage	% of Respondents	
		Telangana	Andhra Pradesh
1	Customary practices	40.1	26.4
2	Auspicious occasion	27.7	4.0
3	Attaining puberty	23.3	18.1
4	Pressure from the family	37.3	35.3
5	Migration	12.7	3.0
6	Security	7.7	23.2
7	Sexual assault	5.9	14.8
8	Avoid dowry	9.4	27.0
9	Division of property	18.2	4.0

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

Table 12: Life Course Events of Women

S No	Life Course Events of Women	Age at Marriage					
		Telangana			Andhra Pradesh		
		10–14	15–17	Total	10–14	15–17	Total
1	Age at puberty	10.31 (102)	10.38 (614)	10.37 (716)	10.41 (229)	10.38 (1,715)	10.38 (1,944)
2	Age at completion of education/dropout	11.50 (63)	16.18 (251)	15.24 (314)	10.30 (151)	15.78 (1,165)	15.15 (1,316)
3	Age of entry into the labour force (before marriage)	12.33 (52)	15.36 (129)	14.48 (181)*	13.26 (119)	16.70 (392)	15.90 (511)*
4	Average age at marriage	12.81 (102)	16.22 (614)	15.74 (716)	13.42 (229)	16.53 (1,715)	16.16 (1,944)

* Involved in paid work (remaining were in unpaid work)

Figures in parentheses represent the total number of women.

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

Table 13: Life Cycle and Age at Marriage

S No	Life Cycle and Age at Marriage	Age at Marriage					
		Telangana			Andhra Pradesh		
		10–14	15–17	Total	10–14	15–17	Total
1	Puberty–marriage	10.00 (07)	–	10.00 (07)	10.78 (20)	11.33 (12)	10.98 (32)
2	Puberty–education (dropout)–work–marriage	12.45 (52)	15.89 (129)	14.90 (181)	13.9 (119)	16.5 (392)	15.9 (511)
3	Puberty–education–marriage	–	16.83 (140)	16.83 (140)	–	16.95 (438)	16.95 (438)

Source: Table generated from field data by the authors.

(Figure in the parentheses represents the total number of women).

EPW Index

An author-title index for *EPW* has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2012. The PDFs of the Index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the *EPW* website. Visitors can download the Index for all the years from the site. (The Index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.)

EPW would like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the library of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, in preparing the index under a project supported by the RD Tata Trust.

This study has concluded that staying longer in school increases the age at marriage of women. This conclusion is based on a consideration of the place of education in the socio-economic lives of women by looking at three broad categories. These are: (i) puberty–marriage: this category of women married immediately after attaining puberty; (ii) puberty–education (dropout)–work–marriage: here the women crossed four phases of life cycle; (iii) puberty–education–marriage: these women stayed in school longer unlike the other two categories of women.

Table 13 (p 63) explains the variation in age at marriage across these categories of women. The difference between the second category of women and the third category rested upon continuity with education. Here the third category of women have the highest age at marriage (16.83 years), followed by the second category and then the first category. From the informal discussion with the respondents, it was concluded that the third category of women were basically from the ovc landed families.

7 Conclusions

There are concerns that the substantial improvements in institutional mechanisms in terms of laws, policies, acts, schemes, and programmes, widespread education, and mass media have not translated into a significant increase in age at marriage of women. As a result, women at a very early age are exposed to social responsibilities as well as health risks in terms of early pregnancies, abortions, early age deliveries, and child mortality, for which they are often not physically or mentally prepared.

Because of early marriage, girls lose their access to education and employment. These impact negatively on their decision-making capacities in their homes and in turn on their development.

In many parts of India, a combination of tradition, poverty, and lack of opportunity put a large number of young people “at-risk” of early marriage. Across the states in India, large variations have been observed in terms of the percentage of women getting married. Out of the total number of states, the age at marriage is up to 18 years in 16 states. In undivided Andhra Pradesh, the figure was 16.1 years in the NFHS-3 (2005–06) as compared to 15.3 in the NFHS-1 (1992–93) and 15.4 in NFHS-2 (1998–99).

The findings of the study reveal the persistence of patriarchal norms in both the states irrespective of social, economic, and cultural categorisation. The same has been reflected in the type of families (joint or nuclear) and type of headship within the family. The father/elders are the ultimate perpetrators of this institutional norm. A detailed analysis of the factors that influence the age at marriage has been conducted, and the main factors identified are education, awareness, and exposure to mass media. The different issues that have been covered under education are: (i) age at marriage influenced by different level of education; (ii) analysis of the level of education between two generations and hence the age at marriage; (iii) availability of different educational institutions at the village level; and (iv) reasons for dropping out of school and age at marriage.

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The study reveals that the outcome is positively influenced with education. In order to support this argument, the study has conducted an analysis of the life cycle of women in areas under study of both the states. The decision of parents to continue with their daughters' education after they attain puberty completely depends upon the availability of schools with proper infrastructure and effective implementation of government programmes and schemes. When these mechanisms prove ineffective, poverty, coupled with lack of social as well physical infrastructure in the educational institutions, cause a large number of girls to discontinue their education and enter into the labour force to help the family (on paid and unpaid basis), biding time till their marriage is settled. However, the other categories of women who continue with the education marry at a later age.

The awareness of law varies with different socio-economic backgrounds. Again education is found to be a significant factor that influences awareness of law and hence indirectly the age at marriage. Apart from this, income is another indicator that determines awareness. This study finds that exposure to mass media is an important factor in creating awareness among the respondents. An analysis of the NFHS data on Andhra Pradesh shows that the proportion of women who watch television at least once a week has risen to 74.3% in the NFHS-3 (2005–06) from 39.1% since the time of NFHS-1 (1992–93). Therefore, availability and accessibility to television was found to be an important indicator in the study.

The evidence based on review of documents and analyses of secondary information has hinted at improvement in the implementation of different acts and schemes—for example, Girl Child Protection Scheme, 2005; Kishore Shakti Yojana; National Programme for Adolescent Girls; Rajiv Gandhi

Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (or Sabla Programme). The Prevention of Child Marriages Act, 2006, a legislation meant to combat child marriage in India, has been criticised on the ground that it does not invalidate an underage marriage. Merely giving a girl child an option to end the marriage after the age of 15 years may not be sufficient (Government of India 2008). In addition to this, khap panchayats, honour crimes, love jihads, and violent proscription of inter-caste and inter-community marriages, make adolescent girls especially more vulnerable to forced early marriage, domestic violence, and they are not allowed to enter into non-heterosexual unions, remain single by choice, or enter into marriages of choice.

The life cycle mapping in this study clearly reveals that marriage is the non-negotiable last stage in the life cycle of young women in the reproductive age group. The underlying thread is also that while mothers and parents might defer marriage by a few years, the decision still vests with the parents and not with the girl who is going to get married. In fact, this is an underlying assumption in schemes announced by the government as well, like the Shaadi Mubarak and Kalyana Lakshmi schemes.

With these limitations set out, the study finds education as a thread connecting all the issues. In conclusion, we may say that the two most important exogenous variables that cause variations in age at marriage are awareness and education, and of the two, education is the most critical and brings with it a measure of autonomy and certainly greater awareness. But the question still remains: How might we use formal education and popular education to generate a more sustained debate on the root causes for women's extreme vulnerability in patriarchal families, of which early and underage marriage of girls is just a symptom?

NOTES

- 1 Among the different types of mass media, television has the greatest reach across all categories of women, including illiterate and poor women. Overall, 74.3% of respondents watch television at least once a week in NFHS-3 (2005–06). The proportion of women who watch television at least once a week has risen sharply since the time of NFHS-1 (1992–93), when it was 39.1% (IIPS 1995; IIPS and ORC Macro 2000; IIPS and Macro International 2008).
- 2 In Telangana, the number of primary schools without drinking water facility is very high in Nalgonda (652), Adilabad (532) and Medak (508) districts while the number remains low in Nizamabad district (113). In the case of upper primary schools too, the number of such schools remain high in Medak (124), Nalgonda (121), and while a fewer in Hyderabad (15). In Andhra Pradesh, the number of primary schools without drinking water facility is very high in Kadapa (397), Kurnool (322), Chittoor (290), Guntur (282), Srikakulam (267), Vizianagaram (242) and Prakasam (199) while the number remains low in Anantapur district (138), East Godavari (72) and West Godavari (26). In the case of upper primary schools too, the number of such schools remain high in Vizianagaram (103), Chittoor (77), East Godavari (67), Srikakulam (62), West Godavari (46), Guntur (41), Prakasam (20), Kurnool (14), Anantapur (12) and Kadapa (02).

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