

The Tie That Binds - Early Marriage And Women's Empowerment In Two Indian States

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Introduction

The transition to marriage is one of the most pivotal life experiences, influencing both social and demographic behavior over the entire length of the life course. While for many women this transition is entirely voluntary, for millions of others it is not, particularly when marriage takes place during childhood or early adolescence. These types of marriages remain common throughout much of the developing world, with an estimated 51 million adolescent girls aged between 15 and 19 who are married (Mathur, Greene, and Malhotra, 2003). The consequences of this for the health and well-being of these women, their children, and their families are an increasingly important issue in social and demographic research, with early age at marriage associated with a range of negative demographic and social outcomes. These include early childbearing, higher completed fertility, lower use of contraception, increased levels of domestic and sexual violence, and a greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

While this research has led to a broader understanding of both the determinants and consequences of early marriage, there is relatively little in the way of empirical research linking early marriage specifically to female empowerment, despite the clear implications this has for all of the demographic and social outcomes described above. This paper aims to address this gap in the literature by exploring this relationship in two of India's poorer

states, Bihar and Jharkhand, drawing on a multi-dimensional conceptualization of empowerment that goes beyond the more narrow focus of much of the previous work in this area. We are also able to take advantage of a detailed dataset focusing specifically on the prime ages at which marriage takes place, allowing a more precise exploration of the immediate impact of marriage on young women than has been undertaken previously.

Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment

In its broadest sense, empowerment can be defined as “the expansion of freedom of choice and action” (Narayan 2002, xviii). While this definition provides a concrete basis for understanding women's empowerment, recent research has increasingly emphasized the multi-dimensionality of the concept, a direct result of the multiple social and familial roles women occupy at given points in time. Furthermore, women's empowerment in a given area of their life is not static, and changes over time and the life course. As a result, women may be empowered to differing degrees depending on which area or stage of their lives is emphasized (Malhotra and Mather 1997; Kishor 1995, 2000). One implication of this is that researchers should emphasize and examine individual dimensions of empowerment in their analyses in addition to attempting to address empowerment more generally. However, the majority of empirical research in this area has failed to effectively differentiate between individual dimensions of empowerment, typically combining indicators from multiple dimensions of women's lives together into single analyses.

Malhotra and Schuler (2004) identify five distinct but interrelated dimensions of women's empowerment in the household, community, and broader arenas: legal, political, economic, social and cultural, and psychological (83). The latter three dimensions are of particular interest for this study, which focuses primarily on household and individual level determinants of female empowerment, are the economic. The economic dimension focuses broadly on women's access and control over household resources, the social and cultural dimension on control over individual behavior (including freedom of movement, participation in domestic decision-making, and control

over reproductive health), and the psychological dimension on psychological well-being (including self-esteem and self-efficacy).

In societies organized around patriarchal and patrilocal kinship structures, such as those common throughout South Asia, power and autonomy are typically largely dependent on age and sex. Within this structure, young and newly married women are particularly disadvantaged and face restrictions on each of the dimensions described above. These typically have very “little choice in about whom and when to marry, whether or not to have sexual relations, and when to bear children” (Jejeebhoy 1998: 1285), and are highly dependent on other household members for decision-making, particularly if the decision involves activities outside of the home or spending money (Singh, Bloom, and Tsui 1998). Research in this area has also found that adolescent girls in these contexts also have very little say in contraceptive and family size decisions (e.g. Chapagain 2006; Mason 1998; Singh, Bloom, and Tsui 1998).

Based on the findings of the research presented above, we have developed three specific hypotheses that will guide the analyses in this study. We expect that:

1. Later marriage will be associated with greater empowerment in the *social and cultural* dimension (mobility, participation in decision-making, and exposure to domestic violence)
2. Later marriage will be associated with greater empowerment in the *economic* dimension (communication with elders and husband about employment and spending, current employment status)
3. Later marriage to be associated with greater self-esteem and efficacy (the *psychological* dimension)

Data and Setting

The data used in this study to explore the relationship between age at marriage and female empowerment come from a baseline survey conducted as part of an adolescent reproductive health program in Bihar and Jharkhand, two poor and predominantly rural

states in central India¹. The region has some of the highest rates of youth marriage in India, with 68 percent of women aged 20-24 reporting a age at first marriage of less than 18. While fertility has been falling in the region, the most recent total fertility rate was one of the highest in India at 3.5 births per woman, with women aged 15-19 contributing to 16 percent of total fertility (International Institute for Population Sciences and ORC Macro, 2001). Data was collected from a random sample of 3,517 married and unmarried boys (n=1,750) and girls (n=1,767) between the ages of 14 and 24 and 1,231 adults aged 30 and over in six sites. The analyses are restricted to currently married girls, resulting in an analyses dataset of 750 girls.

Information was collected on a wide range of demographic and social variables, including marital and fertility histories, knowledge and use of contraception and sexually transmitted diseases, educational level, work experience, living arrangements, and household ownership of assets. Youth were also asked a number of questions specifically designed to measure their autonomy, both within their marriages (if married) and within their households more broadly. The questions focused on mobility (both within the village and outside the village), communication and decision-making regarding a range of social and reproductive health issues (both between youth and household elders and between marital couples), experience with violence and coercion within the marital relationship, and a range of questions exploring their feelings of self-efficacy and worth.

The results of the baseline survey confirm the high rates of early marriage for girls in the region, with 57 percent of girls aged 14-20 at the time of the survey reporting being married. The average age of marriage for these girls was 16, younger than both India's legal minimum age for marriage (18) and the girls reported ideal age for marriage (17). The vast majority of couples lived in extended households, and over a third of girls reported that household elders never took their wishes on childbearing into account. As is common in this region, marriage and childbearing were closely linked, with 93 percent

¹ For more information on this project, known as the Development Initiatives for Sexually Healthy Adolescents (DISHA), please visit: http://www.icrw.org/html/projects/projects_adolescence.htm#DISHA.

of married girls having had at least one child, with the first child being born on average 18-24 months following marriage.

Analytical approach

The analytical approach adopted by this study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between early marriage and female empowerment. In order to do this, we begin by exploring determinants of each of the individual dimensions of empowerment separately, and then combine these to create an overall measure of empowerment (resulting in a total of four distinct regression models). This approach allows us to differentiate among individual aspects of empowerment, allowing a more comprehensive assessment of their relationship with age at marriage and other household characteristics in this context, and a more general analysis of the determinants of overall empowerment in this context.

In each of the analyses the dependent variable will be an index generated by a factor analysis based on a group of questions designed to measure each dimension. In each case, the actual factor scores for the latent variable will be used, resulting in a continuous measure of empowerment on each individual dimension that can be analyzed using ordinary least squares regression. Scales based on the answers to the questions will also be developed and analyzed using categorical regression techniques, with the results of each approach compared to determine the most appropriate for the data and the substantive questions we are exploring. The questions included in the construction of the dependent variable for:

- the economic dimension of empowerment include: the ability to discuss schooling and employment options with elders in the household (usually, sometimes, never); perception of the degree to which these elders take the woman's wishes into account regarding schooling and employment; and participation in paid employment over the six months prior to the survey.
- the social and cultural dimension include: the degree of freedom to visit health centers if sick (can go without permission, only with someone, with permission

- only, or cannot go), both inside and outside the village; the degree of freedom to visit accompany a sick family member for treatment; the ability to discuss socializing and friends with household elders, when and whom to marry, and how many children to have; the woman's perceptions of the receptiveness of household elders to her wishes regarding socializing and friends, when and whom to marry, and how many children to have; the ability to discuss with her husband when to have children, how many to have, the use of contraceptives, the type of contraceptive used, and when and when not to have sex (talk comfortably, uncomfortably, and never); and frequency of physical abuse, verbally abuse, or threats of abandonment in prior six months (never, sometimes, several times)
- the psychological dimension include: feelings on number of good attributes; importance to other family members; feelings on being capable of performing tasks; importance to friends; respect for one's opinion from elders; and whether elders feel the woman has many good qualities (agree, agree to some extent, disagree).

The key independent variable in the analyses conducted in this paper centers around marriage and the entry into marital union. In this region of India it is relatively common that there be a period following the marital ceremony before cohabitation in the husband's home begins. The effect of each of these on empowerment will be explored by including each separately in regression models and comparing the results. In addition, the analyses will include a number of variables designed to measure life course stage (age and number of sons and daughters), individual characteristics of the woman related to empowerment (education, experience with employment, membership in community organizations and credit-savings groups), household wealth (based on an index of household asset ownership), and a limited set of community variables based on data collected from adults in their community.

As with other studies exploring the linkages between early marriage and future social and demographic outcomes, this study faces a number of analytical challenges/issues. In particular, it has proven particularly difficult to determine a causal direction for these

relationships. However, this is partly alleviated in our study by the time-lag between marriage and the point in time when we measure empowerment. While this by no means completely establishes a causal relationship, it provides support for the conceptual framework linking marriage and empowerment described above. A second major analytical issue we face in this study is the issue of selectivity. Because marriage is likely to be selective on certain individual traits, and early marriage particularly so, this is a particularly important issue in this context. In order to explore the degree to which this influences the results of our analysis, we will conduct a separate analysis of the determinants of entry into marriage in this region, taking advantage of the fact that the full dataset includes both married and unmarried youth. In this case the dependent variable will be a dichotomous dependent variable indicating marital status, and the independent variables will be the characteristics of the individuals. While this does not allow us to directly address the issue of selectivity statistically, it will provide additional information as to which determinants are particularly important and suggest ways in which the results of the primary analyses may or not be biased as a result.

This study aims to fill an important gap in the research on the determinants of women's empowerment in India and in other areas of the developing world with similar marital arrangements. In doing so, we hope to further enhance our understanding of the consequences of early marriage, enabling the development of more effective means of alleviating the impact of this on women, their children, and their families.

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