

“Early marriage is bad for boys and it’s bad for girls,” explains Atul Thakor.

The 17 year old from Banaskantha got married a year ago, to a girl the same age. He had never spoken to his bride before the wedding, which was arranged by their parents. In Gujarat, as in several other states across India, boys are as likely to be married as children as girls.¹⁵

“There was a lot of expectation to be more responsible,” he explains.

“I had to help my father working in the fields. They told me that because I was bringing an extra person into the house, now I had to provide for that person and look after her.”

Because of the pressure he was facing, Atul dropped out of school to find work and prepare for marriage.

It was only after his wedding that Atul became a member of a local boys’ group supported by UNICEF, where he learned more about the effects of child marriage and received support to continue his schooling. He wants to become an electrician, or to join the army.

“Now if I hear of a child marriage, I will try to prevent it from happening,” he says. He is doing all he can to secure a positive future for both himself and his wife.

“Unless I have a good job and we are both ready, we won’t have a child,” he explains.” I also want to make sure my wife finishes her education and she gets a job she likes.”

Atul Thakor, 17, with his wife Tejal Chauhan, 17



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ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA

Naval, 17, was engaged to be married at the age of 16. She was pulled out of school and had given up hope of stopping her marriage when two leaders of her caste – the Thakors – turned up at her door. Read her story “Mobilizing Communities for Change”.

India has the largest number of child brides in the world — one third of the global total.¹

Yet, recent data indicates that in the last decade there has been a significant decline in the prevalence of child marriage from 47 per cent to 27 per cent of the proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married before age 18 from 2005/2006 to 2015/2016.² Child marriage among young men and boys has also seen a positive change.

National and state averages, however, mask realities at the district level, and despite the overall decline, a few districts

continue to have very high rates of child marriage. (Child marriage rates among women in a few districts of Rajasthan and Bihar, continue to be in the range of 47 per cent to 51 per cent).³

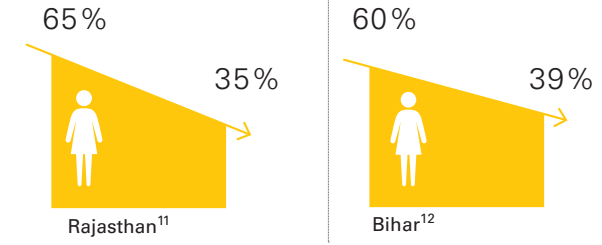
Child marriage violates children’s rights and places them at high risk of abuse. Around one in four married girls and women between the ages of 15-19 have suffered physical abuse at the hands of their husband.⁴ Girls’ right to health is similarly affected: young brides are more likely to be young mothers⁵ and experience serious health complications during pregnancy and childbirth leading to high maternal mortality.⁶

The reasons behind child marriage vary by region, caste and tribe and require specific contextual analysis. However, nationally, the low value attached to daughters plays a significant role and the poorest women are more than twice as likely to have married as children than richer women.⁷ Furthermore, women with no education are six times more likely to get married than those with ten years education or more,⁸ and married women in rural areas twice as likely to be child brides as urban women.⁹

LEGAL AGE FOR MARRIAGE IN INDIA.¹⁰

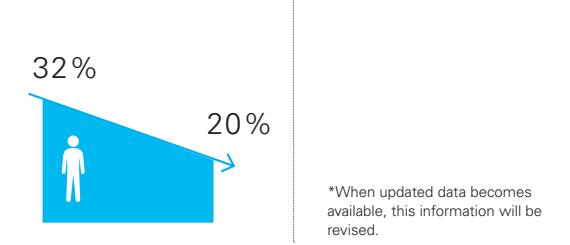


DECLINE IN THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN AGED 20-24 MARRIED BEFORE AGE 18 IN THE LAST DECADE.



A DECADE AGO, NEARLY ONE IN THREE YOUNG MEN WERE MARRIED BY AGE 21.¹³

DECLINE IN THE PROPORTION OF MEN AGED 25-29 MARRIED BEFORE AGE 18¹⁴ IN THE LAST DECADE.



Working in partnership with governments, civil society organizations and young people themselves, methods that have already been proven to work will be operated at scale.

In 12 countries with some of the world's highest rates of child brides, UNICEF and UNFPA have joined forces through a Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage. For the first time, existing strategies in areas like health, education, child protection, and water and sanitation, are coming together to form a unique holistic programme with shared plans and goals. Working in partnership with governments, civil society organizations and young people themselves, methods that have already been proven to work will be operated at scale. The programme was officially launched in March 2016 and aims to reach more than 2.5 million girls within the first four years. Donors include the British, Italian, Dutch and Canadian governments, as well as the European Union.

In India, UNFPA and UNICEF's programme aims to reach more than 1.6 million adolescents over four years.

The programme was launched in 2015 to cover eight states with moderate to high rates of child marriage, focusing on districts with the highest incidence. Four of the states have shown promising decline in the rates of child marriage over the past ten years – Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan – and four have had more moderate progress – Maharashtra, Gujarat, Odisha, and West Bengal.¹⁶

Working through existing government schemes to ensure sustainability, UNICEF and UNFPA are aiming to boost the ability of adolescents to speak up for themselves, build community support and increase access to key services like healthcare and education. The two agencies are also focusing on upping access to education, lobbying for key policy and legal changes, and providing economic support to families in need.

5 KEY ROUTES TO CHANGE

The Global Programme will:

- 1 Empower adolescent girls at risk of and affected by marriage
- 2 Work with families and communities to promote positive behaviours towards girls
- 3 Ensure that health, education, protection and other systems are responsive to the needs of girls
- 4 Support governments to create a positive legal and policy environment to end child marriage
- 5 Use and build the data and evidence on what works to end child marriage



EMPOWERED ADOLESCENT GIRLS

“In the group we talk about different health issues, we do a lot of work to help link girls to education and we also discuss child marriage and how it should not take place...”

Meenakshi Meena is 16 years old and leads a girls club at Limbadiya, Rajasthan – one of 610 clubs in Udaipur district supported by UNFPA and the Government of Rajasthan in collaboration with local NGOs, which reach more than 14,000 girls. Meenakshi, who belongs to a tribal community, is trained as a peer educator to run sessions on life skills, health and financial literacy.

The aim is to empower the most marginalized adolescent girls to make informed choices, especially those who are at risk of child marriage or are already married.

“In the group we talk about different health issues, we do a lot of work to help link girls to education and we also discuss child marriage and how it should not take place... we sing songs, learn new things and address problems that any of us have. Child marriage exists in the village. But now we have an improved understanding and we talk to our parents about the problems it causes. Over the last two years, we've also helped prevent child marriages.”



Meenakshi (middle), who is trained as a peer educator, leads an adolescent club in Limbadiya, Rajasthan. This is one of 610 clubs in Udaipur district supported by UNFPA and the Government of Rajasthan in collaboration with local NGOs. Najmin Shah (Right to Meenakshi) teaches life skill classes in the club. Meenakshi's sister (L) listens attentively to their conversation.



Naval, age 17, Banaskantha, managed to escape from marriage thanks to leaders from her own Thakor caste group banning child marriage in her community. This move came after UNICEF training on issues such as child rights and gender discrimination – the first time the group had heard that child marriage was illegal.

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POSITIVE LEGAL AND POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Rajasthan is being hailed as national example, after launching both a state Strategic Action Plan to address child marriage and a state-wide campaign: Saanjha Abhiyan (collective campaign).

For the first time ever, state government, UNFPA, UNICEF, NGOs, young people and their communities are working together – targeting people from the village to the state level – to inspire not just respect for the law, but social change.

For the State Government it is easy to explain the consensus.

“What is more important than children and their future?” says Nisha Meena, Deputy Director of the Women's Empowerment Department in the Rajasthan State Government.

The campaign includes large events, community murals, social media campaigns and even a mobile phone ring tone. At the district level, mobile vans travel from village to village to encourage dialogue, engage young people with games, and host film screenings and play performances. The campaign is running alongside the state action plan - the result of a large-scale consultation with young people, government, NGOs, UN agencies and others. The plan will include two year, five year and ten year targets, within a huge range of strategies, from empowering young people to making laws and protection systems more stringent.

“Hammering just on one side will not do,” says Nisha Meena. “We need to hammer on all side simultaneously if we want to end child marriage.”



MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES FOR CHANGE

Now leaders from other caste groups are getting in touch with the Thakor leaders, keen to emulate their example.

Pulled out of school, and engaged for a year, Naval had begun to give up hope of stopping her marriage.

“I didn't expect to find the allies I did,” admits the 17 year old.

One day in April two leaders of her caste – the Thakors - turned up at her door. They told her father the wedding could not go ahead. Then they promptly travelled to the groom's house and told him the same.

“Our rules have more weight than any other form of law,” says Thakor Shivaji, one of the men who visited the family. “People respect what we have to say.”

In February the caste leaders of 20 villages in Banaskantha amended their constitution, adding a new rule: Girls under the age of 18 could not marry, and neither could boys under the age of 21. The move came after UNICEF training on issues like child rights and gender discrimination – the first time the group had heard that child marriage was illegal.

Social pressure to marry within caste – and for girls to do so at puberty – can be enormous. However, these leaders were determined to set a different precedent. Now they hear about upcoming marriages from members of the community and then visit and monitor families.

“They told me about this resolution that had been passed in February and the ill effects of child marriage – especially on girls' health,” says Naval's father, Dinesh Chauhan.

Naval's family has promised to wait until the youngest of their three daughters is of legal age, before any of the girls marries. In the meantime, Naval has completed school and wants to become a nurse.

Now leaders from other caste groups – including the Advasis and the Rabaris – are getting in touch with the Thakor leaders, keen to emulate their example.



LINKING GIRLS TO SERVICES

“When girls are productively engaged it also changes the mindset of families. I feel very proud of my daughter,” says Nandini Bisoyi of Gaiba village in Odisha. She is the mother of 18-year-old Pinki who after completing a tailoring course is now engaged in a garment unit in one of India's bustling metros.

UNFPA has been working with the block administration, and the Panchayat Raj department in Gumma block of Gajapati district in Odisha, to bring together girls, empower them with life-skills, and link them to skill building opportunities through adolescent girls community resource centres.

Interventions like these are helping advocate for a greater push within government programmes and services to strengthen the outreach to adolescent girls and enhance their value in an environment free of discrimination and harmful practices.

A key strategy for the initiative has been to strengthen access to services through ongoing government programmes such as the Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK- National Adolescent Health Strategy), and the state skill development mission for continuing education for out of school girls, and for skill building have also been forged with private sector partners. Parents of these girls, and service providers are now increasingly talking about the need for girls to realize their aspirations through appropriate training, education and access to information and services.

Interventions like these are helping advocate for a greater push within government programmes and services to strengthen the outreach to adolescent girls and enhance their value in an environment free of discrimination and harmful practices.