The role of parent-child communication in delaying child and early marriage of girls

Background

Child marriage compromises the health and wellbeing of nearly 650 million women and girls globally, leading to higher sexual and reproductive morbidity, and vulnerability to violence and coercion within families. Despite child marriage prevention efforts, the practice remains pervasive affecting the potential of girls in realizing their capabilities for economic and social participation. In present interventions, parents and the extended families are often not included as stakeholders despite their say on decisions around marriage and life choices of girls. Parenting styles and communication with children, particularly girls can reinforce or alter inequitable gender norms, especially as adolescents transition to young adulthood. Few studies in low and middle income countries (LMICs) investigate parent-child interactions using a life-course lens. Using the Young Lives study (n=1,648), which follows girls between ages 8 to 19 years (2002-2013) across four contexts, we examined two aspects of positive parenting, parent-child communication and parent-child relationship quality in early adolescence in delaying marriage of girls. Parent child communication was measured through items related to talking to or supporting children on things that mattered to them and parent-child relationship quality was measured by reports of feeling loved, feeling proud of children and children reporting they were treated fairly.

Key Research Question: Multivariate association of positive parenting factors (measured at age 12 years) on marriage before 16 years, before 18 years and marriage by 19 years of age, adjusted for sociodemographic factors and other determinants such as menarche, rural residence and school dropout. Child and early marriage were assessed per global standards of marriage.

Results

- Nearly 1 in 5 girls (18%) reported marrying prior to 18. Child marriage prevalence was high in both India and Ethiopia, with latter reporting very early marriages (married<16) (Graph 1).
- Findings showed that higher parent-child relationship quality at age 12 was protective against very early marriages (before age 16) and moderate quality of parent-child relationship was protective against child marriage (marriage before 18 years of age. Detailed tables in the paper.
- Results suggested that while communication was protective against child and early marriage. However, after 18 years of age, the likelihood of marriage increased as it was legally permissible
- School dropout and early menarche put girls at greater risk of child (<18 years) and very early (<16 years) marriages.

Note: The remaining percent include girls who reported not married by age 19 years of age

Qualitative research conducted in the Young Lives study showed cultural and generational change, with reports of both pressure and resistance. This research shows that norms around early marriage interact with low value to girls’ education and decisions on aspects of their lives.

“When I ask my caregivers for clothing and school materials, they say, ‘we don’t have any money’. I buy my clothes by doing paid work. ... They just expect me to get married and earn them bride wealth. They don’t care if I learn or not.”10

“When the girl stays at the garment company and works, she is the one who decided when she would get married. If the girl stays at home not working then the parents make the decision about her marriage. They decide themselves when they want to get married because they are earning money.”11

Our parents used to give us to somebody we do not know and collect their bride wealth ... they cover our face with a shawl and put us on the horseback to ride us to the groom’s house ... it was like sending us into a prison... Now, if I marry off my daughter out of her interest, she will refuse and oblige me to pay back any bride wealth I take.”10

Now, the girl and boy have to like each other and they have to talk to each other before marriage. They both go into the room and talk. They discuss whether they like each other or not. It was not like that when we were younger. Our parents told us to marry and we married. If they don’t like or if we don’t allow them to talk they will say that they don’t like him and don’t want to marry. They bluntly say that they do not like him. If we object, they say that it is they who have to live with him for the rest of their life so they want to talk to him before marrying. We have to marry them to the person they like.”11

“Nowadays we cannot impose on our children what we want them to do. Instead they impose on us what they want”.12

Parent child communication interventions may increase the voices and choices of girls.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

• Better parent-child communication and relationship quality in early adolescence (10-14 years) was protective against child and early marriage of girls.

• Interventions for child marriage prevention need to focus on positive parenting at early ages to influence intra-familial decision-making on marriage and life choices for girls.

• Qualitative studies show intergenerational value differences in girl agency and parent-child communication interventions may increase voice and choice of girls.10-13

• Future studies should better measure parenting styles6, positive parenting aspects, social norms around menarche and girl agency.

• Exploration of communication-focused interventions that examine interactions between communities, families and girls themselves are also needed.

REFERENCES


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