

# **‘MARRIAGE CAN WAIT, OUR RIGHTS CAN’T’**

**— A STUDY EXPLORING CAUSES, IMPACTS AND RESISTANCE IN THE  
CONTEXT OF EARLY MARRIAGE IN BIHAR AND JHARKHAND**

**Submitted By**

**PRAXIS**

Institute for Participatory Practices

**Sponsored By**

Breakthrough

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**'It's been shown that where child marriage is in vogue, six of the eight millennium development goals, you can forget about'**

**– South African activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu,**  
referring to the impact of early marriage on the Millennium Development Goals that include reducing child and maternal mortality, ending poverty and hunger, providing universal education, gender equality and combating HIV/AIDS after a visit to Bihar.

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Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices conducted a formative research on early marriage in two districts of Jharkhand and one district of Bihar to inform the programme strategy of Breakthrough and make programme recommendations based on the research analysis.

The field visits to Ranchi and Hazaribagh in Jharkhand and Gaya in Bihar were undertaken in December 2011 and March 2012 by two teams comprising Nilima, Latika, Pradeep, Ajai, Vikram, Shilpi, Vijay and Anusha. The teams visited two blocks in each of the selected districts and interacted with community members, organised groups, government functionaries and non-governmental organisations working in these locations. The report was put together with dedicated support from Shalini, Sowmyaa and Satyapriya.

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And finally, the authors take responsibility for errors in the report, if any.

## Abbreviations

ANM	Auxiliary Nurse and Midwife
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
AWW	Anganwadi worker
BDO	Block Development Officer
CEDPA	Centre for Development and Population Activities
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
EM	Early Marriage
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Schemes
ICRW	International Centre for Research on Women
ISOFI	Inner Spaces Outer Faces Initiative
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PCMA	Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006)
PDS	Public Distribution System
SC	Scheduled Castes
SHG	Self-Help Group
ST	Scheduled Tribes
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

## Executive Summary

Early<sup>1</sup> marriage is an issue of concern across the world, especially in South Asia as nearly half the number of girls who married early, as reported by Unicef in 2007<sup>2</sup>, belonged to this part of the world. There have been numerous interventions by both government and NGOs in India, that have publicised the negative impact that early marriage has on the health, well-being, growth and development of a child. However, though the age at marriage has shown a marginal increase across the country, early marriage trends showed a prevalence of 60% and above in the last National Family Health Survey conducted in 2005-06.

Publicity, interventions and large-scale incentivisation notwithstanding, the practice was rampant. Age-old customs and traditions, patriarchal notions of the girl as a burden to be married at the earliest and the insecurities associated with having an unmarried girl at home ensured that social sanction has a greater influence on communities than a 100-year-old law.

The current report is of a formative research carried out in a few locations in Gaya district in Bihar and Ranchi and Hazaribagh districts in Jharkhand. It focused on understanding the causes and effects of early marriage from the perspective of the communities in which the practice has been rampant through the use of participatory methods. The research team explored the issue by collecting detailed case stories<sup>3</sup> on the subject matter. These stories were used to evolve a detailed understanding and theories of the causation and impact of early marriage. Based on the associations the community made between early marriage and various other factors that affected their lives, the research suggests entry points for interventions that could facilitate a change in the attitude and behaviour of the community towards a practice that they understand is detrimental to the development of the girl child.

The link between tradition, poverty, dowry practices, lack of opportunities for education, insecurity for a girl's safety because of unmarried girls being seen as easy targets of eve-teasing and other forms of violence, resistance to inter-caste alliances and the practice of early marriage came up through discussions with the community. The impact of the practice on the health of a young girl, her loss of the chance to be educated, and her reduced status in the marital relationship and the marital family was also acknowledged.

A few entry points for intervention or programme development emerged from an analysis of the data of the formative research – education, teen pregnancies, livelihoods, sexual and reproductive health, eve-teasing and the need for control over a girl's sexuality. Following an analysis of existing interventions, there emerged the possibility of looking at men and boys as agents of change not just in the early marriage context, but also as champions of women's empowerment. In addition, the less focused area of gender rights and sexuality was recommended as a possible entry point to bring about a change in mind-set among communities where early marriage is currently seen as the accepted norm.

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout the study, the term 'early marriage' has been substituted for 'child marriage' to convey a few concerns. Primary among these is the need to go beyond a legal construct of the term child. There are multiple legal definitions of who is a child according to laws such as the Juvenile Justice Act 2000 (boy or girl below 18 years of age), the Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act 1986 (boy or girl below 14 years of age) and the Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2006 (boy less than 21 years of age and girl less than 18 years of age). Besides this, it was found that communities were less resistant to interventions on early marriage rather than focusing on child marriage, which they are aware is illegal. Additionally, the concept of age in several communities visited is a fluid thing, with registration of birth being a more recent phenomenon. Age in itself is seen as correlated to physical maturity and not to a legally sanctified entity. The only exception made in this context is the use of the term 'child marriage' when it refers to a legal document or definition.

<sup>2</sup>Progress for Children, A World Fit for Children, Statistical Review, No. 6, December 2007, UNICEF

<sup>3</sup>Names of respondents in the case stories have been changed to protect their identity

The strengths of Breakthrough were identified as training and sensitisation on issues of gender rights and sexuality as well as in evolving communication strategy that facilitated an enabling environment towards a change in attitude and behaviour of the community to reduce early marriage practices. These strengths were vetted against the expressed needs of the communities to suggest a programme strategy that focused on the above-mentioned areas wherein the girl is not seen as a burden or a liability.

The study makes recommendations for the programme strategy based on the analysis of the hypothesis and the availability of implementation partners, the choice of mediums of intervention expressed by the communities and the resources available to Breakthrough.



## 1. Background

Early marriage and consequent childbearing was seen to severely constrain the ability of girls and young women to take advantage of existing educational and sustainable livelihood opportunities. This trend was especially common in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand, where the prevalence of early marriage is high. To tackle this, there was the need to have an intersectional approach to help improve the life and health conditions of young people by addressing the lack of adequate services, the limited set of opportunities, as well as the social and familial constraints such as limited mobility for girls and the pressure to marry daughters at young ages.

Breakthrough, an organisation that uses media campaigns, community mobilisation and leadership development to change attitudes and usher in a culture of human rights, sought technical assistance to conduct a formative research on its initiative to address the issue of early marriage. The project has the long-term goal of facilitating an enabling environment created towards reduction and prevention of early marriage. This they believe will be achieved through a change of attitudes among individuals and communities and by integrating the Breakthrough methodology and issues in the implementing partners' mandate, leading to sustained social change and reduction of early marriage. The focus areas were two districts of Jharkhand – Ranchi and Hazaribagh – and one district of Bihar – Gaya.

Praxis - Institute for Participatory Practices which specialises in participatory approaches that aim to enable excluded people to have an active and influential say in equitable and sustainable development, was commissioned to conduct the formative research and inform the subsequent programme strategy for Breakthrough. The aim was to identify key forms of media to use, and stakeholders to target for capacity building and leadership training so as to effectively link up with existing service providers (government and non-government) with the overall aim of influencing the issue of early marriage in the said locations.

## 2. Understanding the Issue

Although the incidence of early marriage has diminished over the years, it remains an issue of concern across the world. A UNICEF Report of 2007<sup>4</sup> stated that nearly half of the girls who marry early live in South Asia. More than 60 million child brides across the globe, with nearly half of them in South Asia and 41 to 60% of Indian women, were at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century getting married or in union before age 18 is quite understandably an issue of concern. The data from India was more worrisome. Between the National Family Health Survey<sup>5</sup> (NFHS)-1 (1992-93) and NFHS-3 (2005-06) the percentage of women married before the age of 18 saw a very modest decline from 54% to 47%<sup>6</sup>.

Several conventions sought to build a consensus on a minimum marriageable age, the crucial issue of consent to marriage, coercion and discrimination against the girl child<sup>7</sup>. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defined a child as a "human being below the age of eighteen years". In the Indian context, the Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2006 defined child marriage as a contract in which either one or both contracting parties was a child. A child was further defined as a male who had not completed 21 years of age and a female who had not completed 18 years of age.

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<sup>4</sup>Progress for Children, A World Fit for Children, Statistical Review, No. 6, December 2007, UNICEF

<sup>5</sup>The NFHS is a state-wise and national information on fertility, maternal and child health and family planning. Three rounds of this survey have been conducted.

<sup>6</sup>Knot Ready, Lessons from India on Delaying Marriage for Girls, S. Dasgupta and others, ICRW

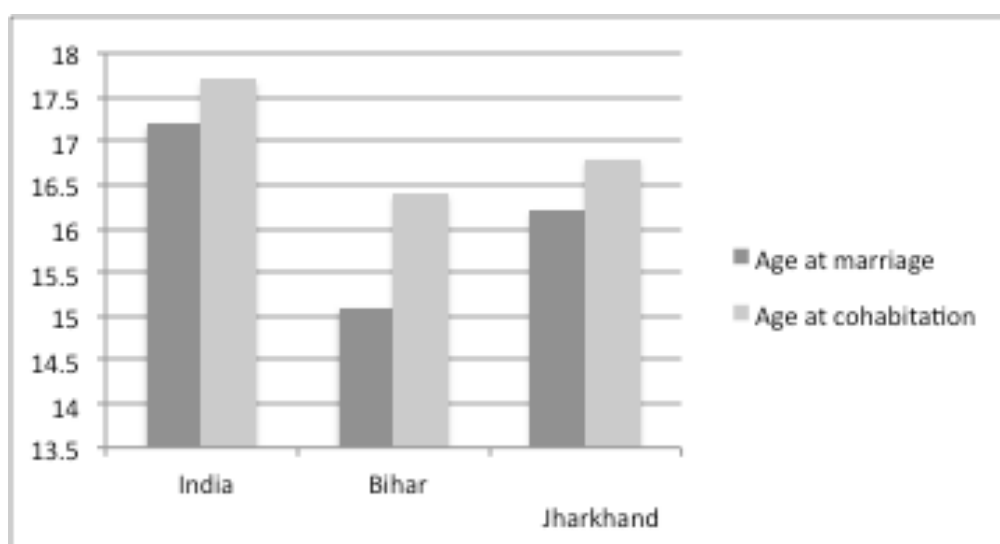
<sup>7</sup>See The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages (1962) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), The International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (1994)

Early marriage was first and foremost an interruption of childhood. As shown in numerous studies, it had a negative impact on education, health, physical safety and autonomy, depriving children of their basic human rights. It acted as a brake on their development and was shown to disproportionately affect the girl child<sup>8</sup>. National and international indicators on maternal health, education, food security, poverty eradication, HIV/AIDS, and gender equality were all negatively linked with high early marriage rates<sup>9</sup>.

## 2.1 Early marriage trends within India

- Although almost all states of the country have witnessed a decline in the prevalence of early marriages, in 2005-06, both Bihar and Jharkhand showed prevalence higher than 60%<sup>10</sup>.
- The median age of marriage in India as based on the NFHS - 3 figures showed that among women aged 20-49 at the time of survey, the median age at first marriage was 17.2 years and the median age of cohabitation was 17.7. By contrast, men in the same age group got married at a median age of 23.4 years and 23.8 respectively. In Bihar, the median age for marriage was 15.1 for respondents aged 20-49. The corresponding age of cohabitation was 16.4. In Jharkhand, the median age of marriage for the same age group was marginally higher at 16.2. But the age of cohabitation was marginally lower at 16.8<sup>11</sup>. This data is shown below.

**Table 1: Age at marriage and cohabitation among girls in India, Bihar and Jharkhand, (Source: NFHS – 3, 2005-06)**



- Early marriage was more likely in poor households than in rich households<sup>12</sup>.
- Education was one of the most important factors influencing the age at marriage. Girls with secondary schooling were approximately 70% less likely to marry early than their uneducated counterparts<sup>13</sup>.
- Caste was a much stronger and more significant influence on age at marriage in NFHS-3 compared to NFHS-2. Members of scheduled castes and tribes and other backward castes are between a third and a half more likely as high-caste women to marry before age 18 in 2005-2006<sup>14</sup>.
- The urban-rural differential was substantial throughout the country. In all the three NFHS surveys, early marriage was found to be more common in rural areas. Almost

<sup>8</sup>Solutions to End Child Marriage, A Malhotra et al, 2011, ICRW

<sup>9</sup>Solutions to End Child Marriage, A Malhotra et al, 2011, ICRW

<sup>10</sup>Knot Ready, Lessons from India on Delaying Marriage for Girls, S. Dasgupta and others, 2008, ICRW

<sup>11</sup>National Family & Health Survey – Reports of Bihar, Jharkhand and India; the study covered 2005-06.

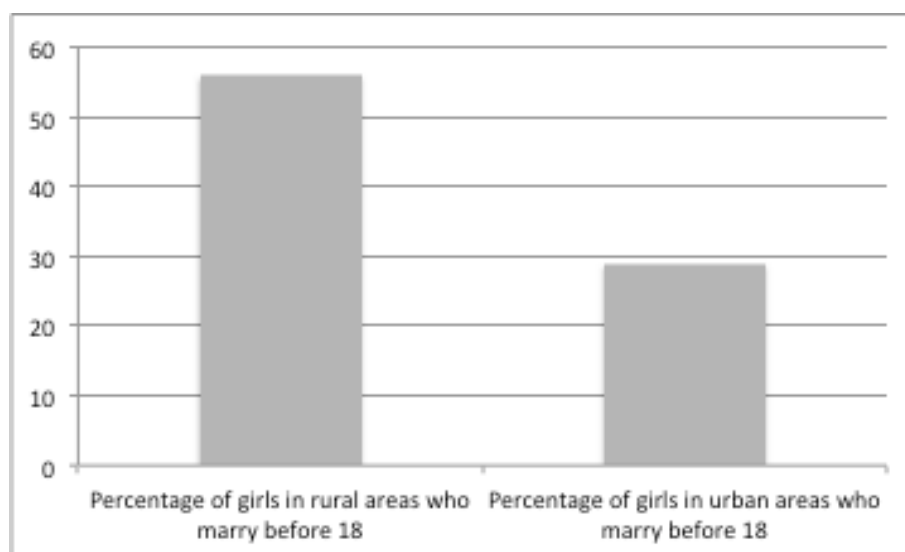
<sup>12</sup>Progress for Children, A World Fit for Children, Statistical Review, No. 6, December 2007, UNICEF

<sup>13</sup>Knot Ready, Lessons from India on Delaying Marriage for Girls, S. Dasgupta and others, 2008, ICRW

<sup>14</sup>Knot Ready, Lessons from India on Delaying Marriage for Girls, S. Dasgupta and others, 2008, ICRW

twice as many girls in rural areas (56%) marry younger than 18 years, compared to girls in urban areas (29%)<sup>15</sup>. This data has been tabulated below.

**Table 2: Percentage of rural and urban girls who get married before the age of 18**  
(Source: ICRW study)



## 2.2 Conceptual Framework

While early marriage continues to be looked at largely from a reproductive and sexual health framework, this research consciously adopted a conceptual framework based on three approaches - a child rights approach, a gender rights approach and a community rights approach. The discussions around these brought up several interesting questions, some of which have been explained here.

### 2.2.1 Child Rights Approach To Early Marriage

<b>Citizenship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of child as a rights-holder</li> <li>• The child is a claimant of rights to survival, protection and development</li> <li>• <b>Does early marriage violate/deny a child's right to any of the above</b></li> </ul>
<b>Protection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to a guardian (parents, guardian, family, community, state)</li> <li>• Proactive protection: <b>If rights not getting protected within the domain of family or community, who should she approach? Who will be responsible?</b></li> <li>• <b>What are redressal mechanisms when guardians turn violator?</b></li> </ul>
<b>Participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Whether there is space for children to participate in decision making on their own marriage?</b></li> <li>• <b>What are the barriers - adults acting on behalf of a child; and through collective norms, mores and customs?</b></li> <li>• <b>An individual child wants to marry early. Certain rights cannot be made available - such as marriage before 18. What about such a scenario?</b></li> </ul>
<b>Primacy to the principle of the Best Interest of Child</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>How to define this in diverse scenarios of early marriage?</b></li> <li>• <b>Best interest of the child in the perception of the family/ community as counter-aligned to perception of best interest in the view of the state/governance.</b></li> </ul>

<sup>15</sup> Knot Ready, Lessons from India on Delaying Marriage for Girls, S. Dasgupta and others, 2008, ICRW

A child rights approach to early marriage (as briefed in the box above) is based on the premise that a child has inalienable rights to survival, protection, development, and freedom from discrimination, physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse. The practice of early marriage is an infringement of all these rights. When it comes to the girl, early marriage is the beginning of a series of rights violations and deprivations that continue to affect the child throughout her life. It has been more intensely discussed in the context of its effect on sexual and reproductive health and education. A human rights perspective is urgently needed to understand the full dimensions of this practice<sup>16</sup>. The study sought to understand from the perspective of the child, the reasons and impact for early marriage.<sup>17</sup>

Listed below are some of the human rights instruments on child marriage:

### **Human Rights Instruments on Child Marriage**

**Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR);** Article 16: 1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

**Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages** Article 1: No marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties, such consent to be expressed by them in person after due publicity and in the presence of the authority competent to solemnize the marriage and of witnesses, as prescribed by law. Article 2: States Parties to the present Convention shall take legislative action to specify a minimum age for marriage. No marriage shall be legally entered into by any person under this age, except where a competent authority has granted a dispensation as to age, for serious reasons, in the interest of the intending spouses.

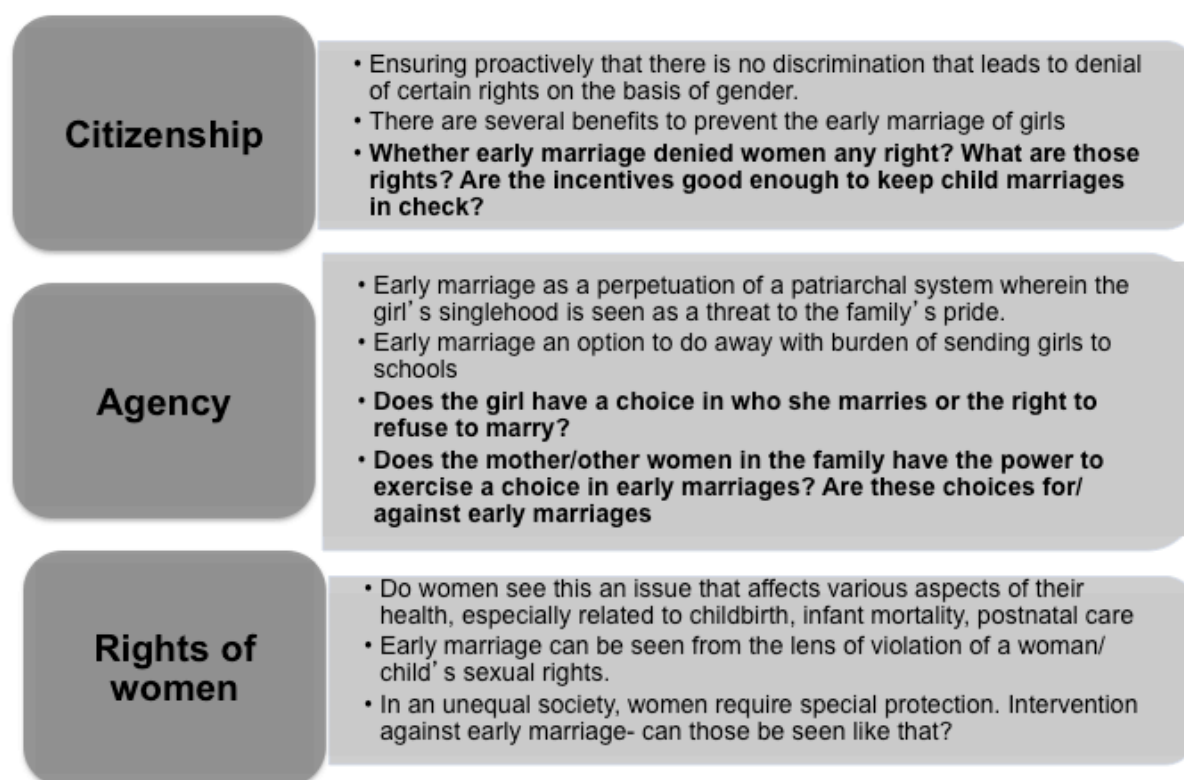
**Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;** Article 16: 1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women: (a) The same right to enter into marriage; (b) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent; (c) The same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution; .... (e) The same rights to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights; ..... 2. The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.

**Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC):** It defines child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years." In its general recommendation no. 4, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, found early marriage to be a harmful traditional practice that negatively affects girls' sexual and reproductive health. The CRC asks states to take all measures to abolish such traditional practices (Article 24(3)) and to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse (Article 34).

<sup>16</sup> Early Marriage, Child Spouses, Innocenti Digest, No.7, March 2001, UNICEF

<sup>17</sup> The research team's interactions with school-going girls on their perceptions of who is a child, when she is considered ready for marriage and when they would actually wish to marry is detailed in Annexure 2.

## 2.2.2 Gender Rights Approach To Early Marriage



A gender rights approach to early marriage (as suggested in the box above) rests on the argument that it is essentially gender discrimination that fuels the practice of marrying girls young. The practice is a form of discrimination against the girl child and a perpetuation of the patriarchal system, which values subservience, notions of morality and honour.

The gender rights approach takes note of the absence of agency associated with the girl child, reflected in seeing her as a burden. The violation of rights is not limited to the girl who is being married early, but also the mother, whose role in decision-making is subservient to that of the father and other male relatives. There has been stereotyping of roles linked to marriage-related processes, such as the male relatives visiting the prospective groom/bride's family, taking a decision or conveying a decision to the mother. Often, men also fall into these gender stereotypes. Young boys could feel pressured to fulfil the roles they are assigned, by years of social conditioning, such as to marry a girl to look after the housework or express the need to marry a girl not as or more educated than themselves; not allow her to work outside the home or even in terms of following 'expected' behaviour patterns with one's wife. Similarly, fathers may feel the pressure to provide for a daughter's safety, to take decisions for her security that conform to the society's understanding of a father's duties.

From the beginning of their lives, girls are socialised to accept male domination and ignore their own needs. Discrimination against the girl child in health, nutrition and education is heightened in adolescence. Onset of puberty decreases autonomy and mobility, with increasing restrictions on speech, appearance, conduct and interaction with the opposite sex. Girls inherit their mother's domestic chores and adopt stereotypical gender roles. Low self-esteem and self-worth are common. After marriage, her husband and in-laws control the bride's life. Consequently, the girls enter a "culture of silence",<sup>18</sup> wherein they exhibit little or no agency in taking decisions that affect their lives and well-being, be it as personal as how many children they wish to have.

<sup>18</sup> Adolescent Girls in India Choose a Better Future: An Impact Assessment; 2001, CEDPA



The field visits to villages in Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Gaya located the issue of early marriage in a gender rights context, asking respondents to locate themselves in the many gender roles associated with marriage and marital life, choices, agency, participation in activities and decision-making.

### 2.2.3 Community Rights Approach To Early Marriage



The community, which in the current context has a significant opinion on issues relating to marriage, is itself a political entity - a claimant of political, economic, cultural and social rights. The community that has been discussed is generally a marginalised community - dalit, tribal or rural poor. Invariably, issues like child marriage could be seen more among such communities who are in any case deprived of many rights, entitlements and participation in spaces of decision-making. As outlined in the box above, as a community, they have their own sets of rights to protect their traditions and cultures given that most legislations and policies are not evolved after any dialoguing with such communities. It is also important to add here that these “communities” are not a monolith - there is a presence of power relationships based on age, gender, class and such other aspects within the community as well.

The community's view of early marriage as a part of time-honoured custom and tradition is, therefore, juxtaposed against an individual's right in the decision-making on marriage. Understanding the importance of the influence of the community in decisions regarding early marriage, it is necessary to explore the complex linkages it has with individual decisions. It is also essential to know how/in what way the community can be sensitised about the issue and roped in to take part in interventions to delay the age of marriage. In the same way, the space for participation by women and children in community-led processes and centres of influence will have a bearing on the nature of community rights and institutions and therefore, on how it can be made a part of the theory.

#### 2.2.4 Existing Legal and Institutional Frameworks in India

From the 1860s, when the Indian Penal Code prohibited intercourse with a wife who had not reached ten years of age, to the debates on the Age of Consent Bill over the age of marriage being fixed at 12 or 14 years; from the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 with its provisions to restrain and not invalidate early marriages to the subsequent amendments in the Act in 1978 when the minimum age of marriage was fixed at 21 for boys and 18 for girls and offences under the Act were made cognizable; and from the CMRA of 1929 to the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 which recognises child marriage as a punishable offence and provides for rigorous imprisonment extending up to two years - the legal discourse on the subject of early marriage has seen a paradigm shift and the mechanism now in place is extensive in its scope. Yet the practice continues to receive religious and social sanction and there are strong socio-economic and cultural pressures on parents to marry their daughters early.

##### THE PROHIBITION OF CHILD MARRIAGE ACT (PCMA) 2006

Whoever, being a male adult above eighteen years of age, contracts a child marriage Punishment shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment which may extend to two years or with fine which may extend to one lakh rupees or with both.

Whoever performs, conducts, directs or abets any child marriage shall be punishable with rigorous imprisonment, which may extend to two years and shall be liable to fine, which may extend to one lakh rupees unless he proves that he had reasons to believe that the marriage was not a child marriage.

The following is a brief outline of some key institutions, policies, schemes, that have been designed by the government to check the practice of early marriage.

**Child Marriage Prohibition Officer** – PCMA, 2006, provides for state governments to appoint Child Marriage Prohibition Officer whose duties include (a) to prevent solemnisation of child marriages by taking such action as he may deem fit; (b) to collect evidence for the effective prosecution of persons contravening the provisions of this Act; (c) to advise either individual cases or counsel the residents of the locality generally not to indulge in promoting, helping, aiding or allowing the solemnisation of child marriages; (d) to create awareness of the evil which results from child marriages; (e) to sensitise the community on the issue of child marriages; (f) to furnish such periodical returns and statistics as the State Government may direct; and (g) to discharge such other functions and duties as may be assigned to him by the State Government<sup>19</sup>. The state governments are also authorised to invest the Child Marriage Prohibition Officer “with such powers of a police officer as may be specified in the notification”. The Act further gives to the District Magistrate, additional powers to stop or prevent solemnisation of child marriages and take all appropriate measures.

**The Eleventh National Five Year Plan** in this regard mentions a “major advocacy and sensitisation programme through all channels of communication and social dialogue, including motivation of local leadership. A multi-media campaign needs to be undertaken to reach out to all sections of the society especially targeting both parents and youth”<sup>20</sup>. One of the strategies – the Conditional Cash Transfer Scheme “would supplement the above efforts by providing cash and non cash transfers to families to encourage them to retain their girls in school and to delay the girl’s marriage beyond 18 years”.

**The 2005 National Plan of Action for Children** speaks of “complete abolition” of child marriage and had set 2010 as the target for complete elimination of this practice. “To prevent and progressively eliminate early marriage and under age child bearing by enforcing Child Marriage (Restraint) Act” is one of the stated objectives<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, page 5

<sup>20</sup> Sub-Group Report, Girl Child in the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) page 16 and 17

<sup>21</sup> National Plan of Action for Children, 2005, Department of Women and Child Development, page 7

Government schemes have been formulated to prevent early marriage in different states like the **Mukhyamantri Kanyadaan Yojana** in Bihar and Jharkhand where information is gathered about the birth of girl children through anganwadi service centres. The scheme works in conjunction with the Unit Trust of India Mutual Fund and once the birth information is processed, officials hand over Unit Trust of India mutual fund certificates to the below poverty line families.<sup>22</sup> **Mukhya Mantri Kanya Vivah Yojana** launched in Bihar in 2008 offers financial support for marriage of girls from economically disadvantaged families. By specifying the marriageable age for girls at 18, it seeks to discourage early marriage.<sup>23</sup>

There are also schemes that do not directly target early marriage but seek to dissuade parents from marrying their girl child off at an early age, primarily by giving incentives for education for instance the **Dhan Lakshmi Scheme** of the Government of India.

In addition to these and as detailed in the section on Child Rights, India is signatory to several human rights instruments that aim to protect children from all forms of abuse/violence, one of which is early marriage.

While the above were a brief snapshot of instruments available the International Centre for Research on Women has identified and evaluated 58 interventions (both governmental as well as non-governmental) in India, which have focused on the issue of early marriage<sup>24</sup>.

### 3. Research Methodology

The main objective of the research on early marriages was to inform Breakthrough's programme strategy design. The study also aimed to identify key forms of media and other stakeholders who could be targeted for capacity building and leadership training so as to effectively link up with existing service providers and enable a change in the early marriage situation.

In order to understand variants of early marriage among different communities and how they differ according to characteristics such as religion, caste, economic, or educational status, the research team visited villages in three districts. Case stories were collected with the aim of generating information on: early marriage practices, intergenerational variants, reasons (cultural, socio-economic and others) and rebels to understand factors that have a bearing on early marriage issues.

#### 3.1 Collection of case stories

As part of exploratory research, the method used was that of collection of case stories that help analyse causes and effects of early marriage. The stories were collected purposively, identified through focus group discussions and collected using participatory tools. The criterion for choosing case stories was to get a spectrum rather than facilitate any analysis that would provide the most widespread reason for early marriage. Between case stories and other information generated from using participatory tools, it was expected that rich information on the early marriage situation would be available.

#### 3.2 Sample Areas

The sample areas were proposed by the Breakthrough team. Within the districts that were proposed (Gaya district of Bihar and Ranchi and Hazaribagh district of Jharkhand) the mandate was to select two blocks from each district where the teams could visit at least one rural and one urban or peri-urban centre.

<sup>22</sup> Muskan gift for poor parents, The Telegraph, November 30, 2009, [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1091130/jsp/nation/story\\_11801151.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1091130/jsp/nation/story_11801151.jsp)

<sup>23</sup> Special Financial Incentive Schemes for the girl Child in India, A Review of Select Schemes, T.V. Sekher, International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai

<sup>24</sup> Knot Ready, Lessons from India on Delaying Marriage for Girls, S. Dasgupta and others, ICRW, Page13



The selection of blocks was based on various criteria - composition in terms of caste, tribes (different kinds of blocks were chosen in order to get a comparative perspective of the situation); accessibility (the team covered one block in a day and therefore preference was given to accessible areas); and the presence of NGOs in the area (this was crucial for the Breakthrough programme to partner with).

Based on these considerations the following blocks (in the map and enlisted below) were identified:



### 1. GAYA

- **Gaya Sadar (Peri-urban)**
  1. Kaldaspur
  2. Dharampur
- **Manpur**
  3. Kaiyyan
  4. Visar (Paswans, Lohiyas, Yadavs)
  5. Kharhari

### 2. RANCHI

- **Kanke (Peri-urban)**
  6. Barhu (Muslims)
  7. Nava toli
- **Angara**
  12. Bejnetata (Tribal presence, but other groups also there)
  13. Jitu (Tribals)

### 3. HAZARIBAGH

- **Hazaribagh Sadar (Peri-urban)**
  10. Jagdishpur
  11. Sarauni/Dumar
- **Padma**
  12. Bandarbela (SC)
  13. Bundu

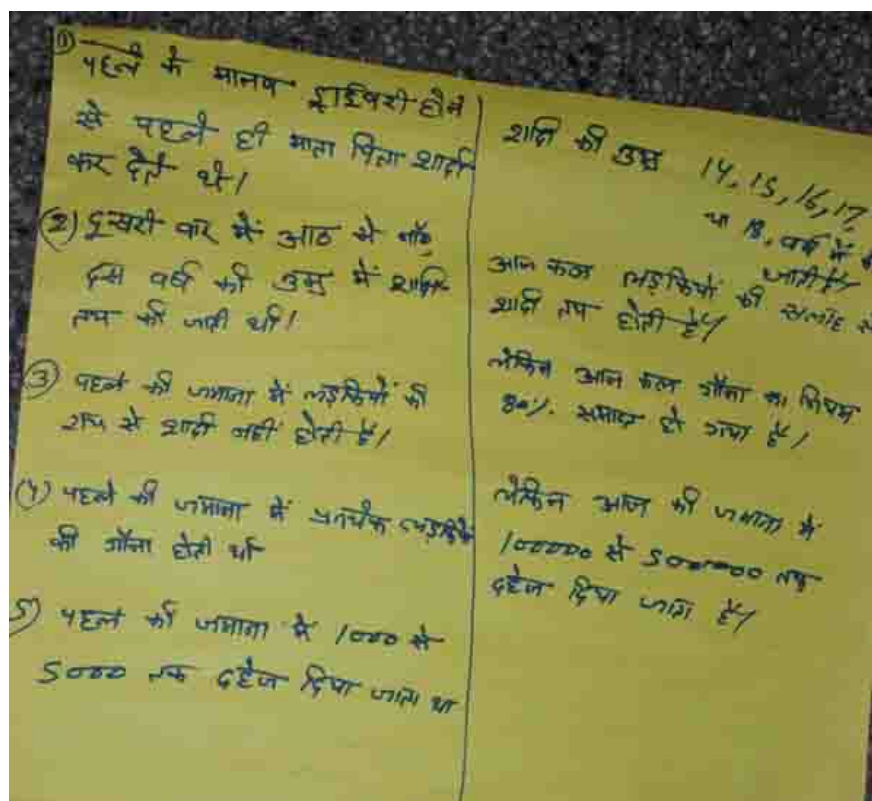
After the blocks and villages were identified, the team carried out a scoping visit to formulate tools that would be used in data collection. Based on the scoping visit and the conceptual framework developed on the basis of the literature survey, the tools were finalised. These included collection of case stories through in-depth interviews, participatory tools and focus group discussions with various stakeholders<sup>25</sup>. A set of probe questions that would give an insight into the early marriage situation in the sample area, the trends involved, some root causes and interventions regarding the same were developed.

### 3.3 Participatory Tools

One of the distinguishing features of this exploratory study by Praxis on early marriages was in its use of participatory tools. Unlike most other studies on early marriages, the researchers chose to investigate the problem, identify the trends, understand the implications and help identify ways of addressing these directly from communities, which continue to indulge in early marriages, by interacting with them. The team used a series of participatory tools to understand the circumstances that compel parents to marry off their girls young, the experiences of girls who have been married before 18, the interface between education and early marriages, the prevailing attitudes towards the issue, the limitations of existing interventions and others in order to help design a suitable intervention. The section below details out how some participatory tools were used with groups in the sample villages and the kinds of information it generated.

#### 3.3.1 BEFORE-AFTER TOOL

The Before-After tool was used during the focus group discussions with women in Barhu, Bandarbela, Kharhari, Dharampur and Sarauni. The image alongside is the before and after tool used in Kaldaspur, with a group of men and women. The tool generated a perspective of the changing trends with regard to early marriages, for instance the rising rates of dowry, beginning of interaction between girls/boys before marriage, increasing age of marriage, the cost of conducting a marriage.

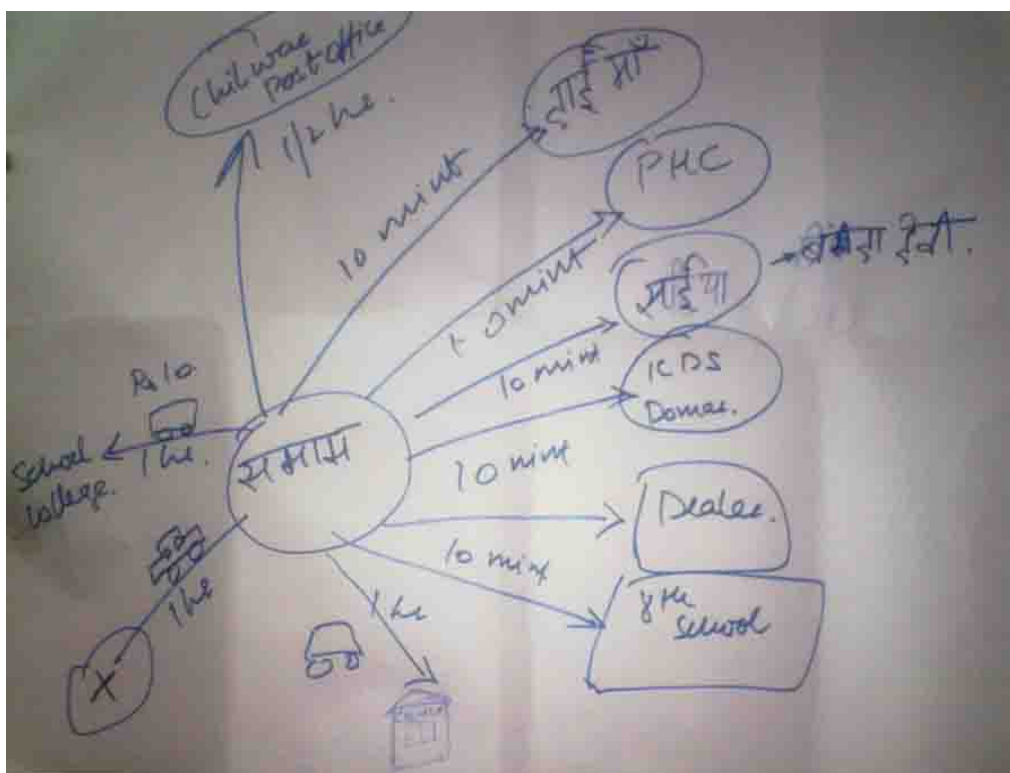


<sup>25</sup> Details of stakeholders who were interviewed, respondents, case studies etc is provided in Annexure II

### 3.3.2 LIFE JOURNEYS

Comparative life journeys of women in the sample villages generated information about individual life stories as well as trends related to early marriage. At Jagdishpur, the Research team chalked out life journeys of three women of one family – Karimi Devi, her daughter-in-law Geeta Devi, and her grand-daughter-in-law Ranjana Devi. The information thus collected enabled a comparative analysis of various trends over time- age of marriage, space between children, education and other such details.

### 3.3.3 INSTITUTION MAPPING



Given the fact that a community's interface with and access to institutions is one crucial factor in determining the age of marriage of girls within the community, the research team used the institution mapping exercise to get community members to map institutions they had access to. This helped the team understand the infrastructure-related problems in the sample areas. It simultaneously gave the participants/ communities a sense of perspective on what infrastructure was available to them and what they needed. At Sarauni women mapped the institutions they felt was important to them such as the bank, primary health centre, middle school, integrated child development services (ICDS) central public distribution system (PDS) dealer, college and so on. While discussing the access to these institutions, it emerged that the intermediate college and high school was 10 kilometres away and since the commute was irregular and expensive, several girls dropped out after matriculation (tenth standard).

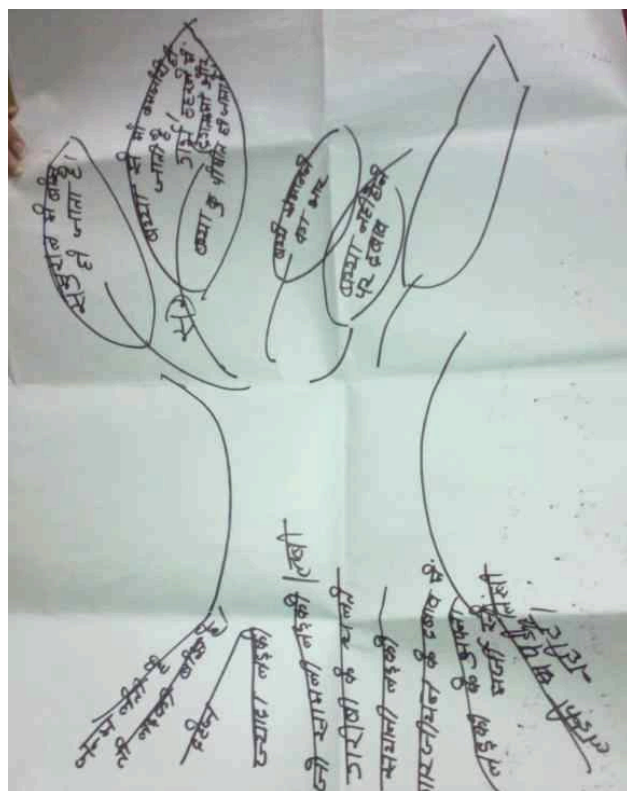
### 3.3.4 PROCESS MAPPING

Process mapping was undertaken to get an idea of the weakest/strongest/efficient links in various processes like accessing schemes or services. This was considered necessary to identify who could be partnered with during the intervention stage of the project. In Visar's Paswan tola, process mapping began with asking the group how they access certain schemes like rural credit or the Mukhyamantri Kanyaadaan Yojana. Members of the group outlined the process of availing benefits under the scheme and what came to light was the fact that several families in this habitation had manipulated the loopholes in the scheme to draw the benefits that were meant to prevent early marriages.



### 3.3.5 PROBLEM TREE

The Problem Tree analysis allowed the community to unpack its own perceptions on the causes of early marriage. While the roots of the tree explored the causes, the branches of the problem tree represent the community's understanding of the impact or manifestations of early marriage. The problem tree (below) from Visar generated several interesting causes and impacts of early marriage, some of which are listed below:



## Causes of Early Marriage

- Daughters were considered burdens from the day they are born
- Dowry weighed heavily on minds of girl's parents
- Girls who mature early and reach puberty and remained unmarried became the subjects of gossip within the community.
- Elders in the family often forced their grandchildren to get married early with the hope of seeing them well-settled before they die
- Girls wanted to marry early as they saw their peers getting married off

## Impacts associated with early marriage

- Girls lost freedom at her in-law's place
- Chances of abortion were greater
- Mother and child mortality rate was high
- There was pressure on the girl to conceive, leading to birth

complications for the mother and child, including the effect of teen pregnancies

- Young mothers were not well equipped to take care of their babies

### 3.3.6 SOCIAL MAPPING

Through social mapping, the research team generated information on various socio-economic aspects of the habitations in the study locations. The community members plotted their habitations on the ground with whatever medium they were comfortable with. The visual representation of the village in this manner, generated discussions on various issues of concern such as availability of infrastructure, community-based access to infrastructure and access to schemes, among



others. Social maps were made in Jitu, a tribal village, and Paswan tola<sup>26</sup> in Visar (image below), Gaya. Once community members plotted maps of their villages, there were discussions on families within the habitation, marriageable girls/boys in each, women headed households, poor and rich households and the relationship between these and early marriage.

### 3.4 Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of this participatory study on early marriages was its small sample size and the resultant problems with regard to drawing inferences and data collection. The study was not meant to be a survey of a representative sample and the data was not completely representative of selected districts.

In this exploratory attempt to comprehend the early marriage scenario in the chosen districts, the limitations of a small sample size was sought to be offset by focusing on outliers and collection of as many variations as possible with regard to each aspect of early marriage.

Due to the emphasis on the real and lived experiences of the community, some of the findings of this study were at odds with well known formulations and widely accepted theories regarding early marriage. For instance, lack of income generating options for girls was often touted as a reason for marrying off girls young and many interventions have been planned to impart skills to the girl child in the hope that income generation by young girls would be an economic incentive for parents against early marriage. In the course of the field work however, it was found that rather than delay the age of marriage, skills acquired by girls, instead of providing an alternative to early marriage, were often used as a bargaining point for reduced dowry. Besides, it was not always seen as an additional family income to fall back on. In some of the areas visited for this study, the strategy was unsuccessful also because living off the income of daughters was considered taboo.

The short duration of data collection is another limitation of this study. This was primarily due to constraints of time.

In terms of selecting the sample villages, it was kept in mind that the team would not be able to cover long distances to access villages given a time constraint. Hence, interior locations, which were difficult to access because of distance from district headquarters or the terrain of the area, were left out. Most of these villages were located close to towns, and well connected. Owing to this, it is possible that there could be lot of urban influence in terms of practices. Given this, it may also be true that situations could be actually worse in terms of early marriages as one goes interior.

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<sup>26</sup> A habitation dominated by the Paswan community, who are on the Indian Central Government list of Scheduled Castes

## 4. Analysis

Evidence from the field revealed that early marriage was common in all villages that the team visited in the three districts of Bihar and Jharkhand. Early marriage, in fact, was a norm rather than an exception. The average age at marriage for girls was 15-17 in all the locations visited by the research team. There were, however, some instances of girls getting married as early as 12 and 13.

Based on focus group discussions, it emerged that generally, girls attained puberty by the age of 14 and start taking care of household chores. Parents simultaneously started to look for grooms. The age at which the girl ultimately got married depended on how early the right groom was found.

In all three districts, the discussion gave insights on certain trends associated with early marriage. These shed light on the community’s perception of early marriage, associated beliefs which fuelled the practice, the pressures on parents for marrying their daughters young, and the ingrained patriarchal attitudes which worked against the girl child. A snapshot of trends is below:

- Marrying off children at a young age was an age-old custom and tradition.
- The practice of giving and taking dowry continued unabated in the region and the prevalence was higher among non-tribal communities. The rate of dowry had gone up considerably. In communities where dowry was not customary, there was a practice of exchange of gifts.
- Desire for male progeny was a common sentiment in the region
- Finding a good match for a daughter was considered to be the primary responsibility of parents, especially fathers.
- Unwed girls in the age group of 17-18 were subjects of gossip and ridicule by the community, attracted unwanted attention within the community and outside and this added to the pressure on parents to marry them off young.
- Early marriage was fuelled by prevalent notions of sexuality, wherein it is seen both as necessary to control a girl’s sexuality as well use it as a means to ‘tame’ boys.
- Parents also often turned to early marriage as a means of dealing with perceived as well as real insecurity regarding their daughters’ physical safety and well-being.

Since the main thrust of this study was on unearthing the many realities of early marriage, instead of singling out any one primary reality, the main findings have been presented in the form of hypothesis derived from literature review and evidence from the field in the two sections that follow — causation theories and impact theories. Following this, the entry points for interventions will be discussed.

**Part I:** The ‘*Hypothesis*’ in the section on Causation Theories was derived from the literature on the subject. Some of the well-established causes of early marriage and the connections between trends (for instance poverty, several female children in a family, absence of education facilities) and early marriage was summed up in the *Hypothesis*. This is followed by *Evidence from the Field* which sometimes showed that the interconnections established have far greater nuances than is generally known. In other words, the myriad realities of communities practicing early marriage are captured in this section.

**Part II:** The second section deals with theories of Impact of early marriage. Here, the various kinds of impact that listed in the literature on the subject were briefly outlined in the *Hypothesis*. Whether the impact/impacts were comprehended by the community as a corollary of early marriage, whether the community perceived the ill-effects of early marriage, whether there existed realities which have been overlooked or generalised in existing formulations on the impact of early marriage was dealt with in *Evidence from the Field*.

**Part III:** In the third section, Entry Points for Interventions have been outlined.

## Part I – Causation Theories

### 1. Early Marriage is a deep-rooted traditional practice, resistant to change

*Hypothesis:* Early marriage has been a deep-rooted tradition, protected by community elders and reaffirmed by generations of social conditioning. Often, incidents of early marriages have been seen as results of certain social mores, which when backed by community structures, not only encourage early marriages but also discourage late marriages. Embedded in this has been a resistance to any interventions vis-à-vis early marriage.

*Evidence from the Field:* Early marriage was an accepted practice across the districts, castes, religious and tribal groups that were visited, though the prevalence rate varied. Tradition was the universally acknowledged reason for indulging in the practice. There were repeated expressions of '*Karna padta hai*' (we have to do it). Deviation from the norm was an invitation to gossip, queries regarding the unwed girl child and assumptions that the parents have failed in their duty to find a groom. '*Kya koi ladka nahin mila?*' (Did you not get a groom yet)? was the question most parents with unwed daughters were subjected to.

Parsuram Mistry of Kaiyyan village in Gaya said that he got his daughter Mamata married off at 14-15 because of the tradition in the village. '*Gaon mein aisa hi hota hai*' (this is how it happens in villages), he said. This sentiment was echoed during an FGD with the Paswan community in Visar village in Gaya's Manpur block. '*Gaon vasi se nigah kharab hoti hai* (The girl comes under the scanner of the village.)'

Being rooted in tradition, early marriage was seen as a very routine and natural practice. Despite legislation against child marriage having been in place for nearly a hundred years there was little awareness about the harmful effects of the practice. Acknowledgement of the ill effects of early marriage on education and health of the girl child came to the fore only rarely during the course of in-depth discussions<sup>27</sup>. There was always a passive resistance<sup>28</sup> to changing this tradition.

In the words of Jeera Devi in Angara in Ranchi, "Girls become relatively free from other tasks by the age of 14. They neither go to school nor work. It is the responsibility of parents to get them married. So the marriage happens."

#### **The practice of early marriage is not limited to girls alone - it applies to boys as well.**

Upendra and Rahul of Paswan toli in Gaya's Visar village said it was part of custom to get boys also married off at an early age. This age was marginally higher among boys (17-18) than among girls (15-16).

Interestingly, unmarried boys were also subjected to ridicule. During an interaction with a theatre group in Manpur, the example of 22-year-old Panchan Kumar was cited. He was studying and does not want to marry. The villagers call him *awara/ujand* (vagabond/ wild).

Kiran Devi of Paswan toli said she got her son married at the age of 17 and her daughter at the age of 15, as was customary in the village.

<sup>27</sup> In contrast is the practice of dowry. The practice of giving/taking dowry, though highly prevalent, is considered a social evil. People acknowledge that it is a wrong practice. Dowry cases get frequently reported. The station house officer at Manpur Mofussil police station said dowry cases were very common. They were the most reported in the category of offences against women.

<sup>28</sup> There is an absence of institutional resistance to interventions against early marriage or institutions that enforce it. The practice is followed by a majority of communities because to them this is the natural process. While they fear what villagers will say, they are not fearful of an organisation/institution that will force them to follow the practice as it happens in some parts of Rajasthan, where community leaders pro-actively ensure early marriage and resist progressive campaigns.

## **2. Absence of educational facilities and failure to appreciate the importance of education has resulted in an insignificant increase in the marriageable age of girls.**

*Hypothesis:* Early marriage has been the tradition in most parts of the country. The increased awareness of the need for education as well as increased facilities for education has led to an apparent increase in the marriageable age in some parts of the country. In the sample areas however, the impact of education on age of marriage has been negligible both because of poor education facilities/ infrastructure as well as the failure of the community to place a premium on education.

*Evidence from the Field:* In the course of interactions with the communities in the sample area, there were often acknowledgements of the fact that girls are entitled to and have a right to education and its importance for them. A large number of respondents sent their children to school and there were conscious attempts to educate the girl child. In Chandra Mahili School in Barhu, in Kanke district of Ranchi, out of the 175 students, 100 are girls. All girls of Kanke's Nava Toli go to school.

With an increasing number of girls going to school, the age of marriage increased marginally - by a year or two. The inevitable question was why this happens, especially because there were a handful of girls who were pursuing their collegiate education. Sanita Kumari of Sarauni/Dumar in Hazaribagh Sadar, who was doing her Geography Honours (undergraduate studies), and Sarita Kumari of Bejnetata, who was in the second year of her undergraduate studies, are some examples. But they were few and far between. The answer can be seen in the multiplicity of barriers of access to education – a factor acknowledged by community members as well as NGOs working in the regions.

The absence or paucity of education facilities for girls beyond the primary or middle school level was an important area of concern. A principal of a middle school in Dumar pointed out that because of the absence of a high school in the village, many students (especially girls) dropped out after Class 8. It was almost impossible to find high schools in a village cluster. This led to twin problem of insecurity and poverty – both of which cause parents to hesitate sending their daughters to a high school in the nearest town.

In Jagdishpur, the vast forest stretches, which girls had to walk through to access educational facilities, posed a psychological barrier to sending girls to school. Ruby Devi and Anita Devi of Jagdishpur said most girls dropped out of school after Class 8 because the access to the nearest school (about 10 km away in Hazaribagh Sadar) was through unsafe, forested areas. Inaccessibility was often also linked to the lack of proper public transport. In Sarauni, the respondents said that the jeep /bus to and from college / high school charged Rs 10 each way. This meant an expenditure of at least Rs 20 a day, which was unaffordable for most families. There were also infrastructure-related problems like absence of separate toilets for girls in schools, which prevented them from studying.

The expectations from a girl child to perform or assist with household chores, including taking care of younger siblings or contributing to labour in the form of cattle-rearing or harvesting, were also a deterrent to education. Jouri Devi who lives in Nava Toli, Kanke block of Ranch dropped out of school when she was in Class 7 as her mother died and she had to take care of her ten siblings. With girls staying at home because of one or the other and often a combination of the reasons mentioned above, "*rishtas*" (proposals) from *aguas* (matchmaking relatives and friends) started coming in. Marriage then seemed inevitable.

However, the team also came across several examples of girls who were continuing their education even after marriage. The trend was found to be more prevalent in Gaya, where the practice of *rusgaddi* or *gauna*<sup>29</sup> was common. Savitri and Chameli of Visar and Pooja Devi,

<sup>29</sup> The custom of *rusgaddi* or *gauna*, also referred to as 'second marriage', is common though not universal in the region. *Rusgaddi* or *gauna* is the 'second marriage' when the girl goes to her in-law's place. It is part of the tradition of delaying cohabitation of a couple who are married young (which is the first marriage). During an FGD in Jagdishpur, Karmi Devi said that earlier *gauna* used to take place five-



Rinki and Mamata of Kaiyyan were among those whose marriage did not close avenues of education. Cases of parents-in-law funding the girls' (daughter-in law's) education were also reported. Pinki Kumari of Wazirganj college of Visar lived at her parent's house and her father-in-law funded her education. Pinki Kumari of Lakhanpur, who is working with Pragati Gramin Vikas Kendra, lived at her parents-in-law's house and was continuing with her education. Her father-in-law paid for her studies.

It was important to note that among the reasons for education being sought for daughters was marriage. There was a widespread recognition of the fact that education was important and handy for finding suitable grooms for girls. The trend of the day for more people was to seek educated brides. This was a universal acknowledgement cutting across the sample area, across the gender divide, age divide, caste/religion educational background and others. Radhika Devi of Ward 8 of Kharhari said the time was not far when it will become difficult to marry off uneducated girls.

Among the poorer families, the mid-day meal scheme with its provision of free lunch was a major attraction. Sending a daughter to school meant one less mouth to feed at home. In one of the poorest houses in Angara a father said that his 15-year-old daughter went to school for one square meal a day which they cannot afford.

On the flip side, however, there continues to be a sentiment within some communities that too much education is not good for the girl child. During an FGD at Barhu, it was said that educating a daughter could be a multiple burden. Not only is it an investment that reaps benefit for the husband/in-laws's family, it also means the possibility of having to pay an increased dowry. More education for the girl child made funding a more educated groom and the more educated a youth the larger was the dowry demand. Shanti Devi from Angara said her family had to pay a dowry of Rs 4 lakh for her niece's marriage because the boy was doing his engineering course. This sentiment stemmed from the patriarchal notion that a husband must be more educated than the wife. An NGO in Padma cited cases where educated girls understate their educational attainments in order to avoid problems in marriage. The only instance of a bride more educated than her prospective groom was seen in Bejnetata. Sarita Devi, who was pursuing her Bachelors in Arts, has found her life partner from the same village. He is a Class 5 dropout and the two are not yet married.

Interestingly young boys in the community also did not fancy well-educated girls as brides. When boys in Jitu, who were doing their matriculation and intermediate (studying in class 10 and 12 respectively), were questioned about the educational qualifications of the women they would like to marry, said they wanted brides educated till Class 8-10 and not more. So while uneducated girls were becoming difficult to marry off, too much education (in the sample areas this translates to education beyond primary schooling) was also becoming a barrier to marriage. The institution of marriage thus, on the one hand made it inevitable for parents to educate their daughters, while on the other, it became an impediment for the girl child's education beyond the primary level. These examples ratified the rationale that better access to education might not necessarily reduce early marriage.

Economic sustainability was often not seen as the end of education. Very few families in the sample area thought of education for a daughter as a means of enabling her to become financially independent. Young boys from the community were very candid about the fact that

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six years after marriage. More recently, as the age of marriage has increased, gauna happens three to four years after marriage. In interviews at Manpur, there were six to eight respondents who had got married before the age of 15 and their gauna was yet to happen. Savita, who was married at 11 years and is now 15, said her gauna would happen two-three years later. The extent to which the tradition of gauna protects young physically immature girls from consummation of marriage is debatable. See *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) - India First Periodic Report 2001*. NGO Ekta Parishad/Pragati Gramin Vikas Kendra representative Shatrughan said the practice was not necessarily healthy despite its effect on delaying age of sexual activity and furthering the scope of education for young girls. He reported several cases where the custom was used as a pretext by in-laws to desert young brides.

though they want educated wives, they did not want working wives. Excuses ranged from protectiveness for wives, concern about their physical safety and a pre-occupation with the fact that household chores and responsibilities would get neglected or side-lined. In other words, '*Who will make the chapattis?*' Among the few who said they would 'allow' their wives to work, there was an ingrained notion that a wife must seek the husband's permission to work. There was also a mind-set about certain kinds of paid work/ employment (for instance teaching in a school) being suitable for women. Bimla Devi from Barhu in Kanke explained, "Boys can do whatever work they like. But girls need security. They cannot do any job. They can do something like teaching which is regarded as respectable."

Despite the predominantly traditional views of financially independent women capable of contributing to family income there were encouraging signs of change. Many parents acknowledged that a sound education would give their daughters the opportunity to work and supplement family income and many husbands were slowly but steadily reconciling to a scenario where the wife's income would come in handy.

It must be noted that within the sample area, there were pockets and stretches, especially in Jharkhand (tribal and mixed habitations), which were an exception to this mind-set against women earning the daily bread and contributing to the family income. In Angara, the team met 15 women, all of them married, who worked in the health sub-centre and ICDS centre in Angara block and supported their families with their income. They were employed as ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife), ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) didis or sahiyas and Anganwadi sevikas. Some were also involved in drip irrigation. One of them, Laxmi Devi, who was a sarpanch<sup>30</sup>, and now works as a sahiya, said, "*Hamare yahan, aurten hi paisa kamati hain* (In our village, the women are the main bread earners)." In a village in Kanke, women were involved in incense stick making.

There were also cases where the girls learnt some skills so that they could use it to earn an income, after marriage. Anju Devi of Kaiyyan learnt tailoring and Lalitha of Charkitongratoli learnt stitching and knitting. There was one case where the in-laws of Neha in Visar planned to buy a sewing machine for her so that she could start a small business and earn for the family.

Cases of unmarried employed girls were rare in the communities visited. Sanita, a 19-year-old girl in Dumar, who was doing a graduation in Geography and simultaneously teaching in a school, was the only one case of her kind the team came across.

There emerged a complex relationship between education, the institution of marriage and financial independence of girls and women – with several paradoxes existing simultaneously. Basic education of an elementary level seems to be a pre-requisite for marriage of a girl while 'too much' education became a liability; the utility of educating the girl child was measured more in terms of its need in finding an appropriate groom and less in terms of the possibility of making girls financially independent; educated girls who were capable of becoming financially independent had to wait for marriage to get employed and they had to do so only with the consent of their husbands and in-laws.

Marriage therefore becomes both an impediment to the employment of young girls in some cases, and an official sanction to employment in others. Girls could dream it big (Poonam, a 16-year-old in Visar, wants to join the Bihar police force) but they must wait for marriage in order to realise their dreams.

### **3. Poverty and absence of livelihood options are the main reasons for early marriage**

*Hypothesis:* Poverty plays a role in triggering early marriage. Several studies have adopted the 'standard of living' measure to establish a correlation between poverty and age at marriage. The fear of an increased dowry demand (which increased proportionately as the girl

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<sup>30</sup> A sarpanch is an elected head of a village level statutory institution of local self-government in India, called the gram panchayat

grows older), inability to pay for education, the economic insecurity of the poor, lack of livelihood options, the inability for parents to provide for their children and related to all these and most importantly the fact that daughters are considered to be burdens - are all reported to be reasons for higher incidence of early marriage among poor families. Early marriage does not even figure in the list of problems that the poor struggle with.

*Evidence from the Field:* Ability of the family to pay dowry was one of the biggest determinants of a girl's marriage age. In Kaiyyan, Reena Kumari's father had to arrange for her dowry by selling off some land before he could marry her off at 17. He was worried about the fact that he had four more daughters for whom dowry had to be arranged.

However, the survey revealed that poverty was not the only trigger for early marriage. In a sample analysis in a village in Angara block of Ranchi district, 16 SHG women members were asked to list 5 each of the poorest and richest families in that village. It was found that early marriage took place in three of the five poorest families and in two of the five richest families – demonstrating that early marriage was practised even by the well-to-do. A case was reported of a rich family with adequate land wherein all three daughters were married early. According to the women, the rich could find good grooms for their daughters faster and this, coupled with the fact that they could pay higher dowries, resulted in urgency to get the daughter married off into the best family. The richest family in the Yadav (OBC) cluster in Visar, at the time of the survey, had reportedly married off all daughters of marriage-able age and were planning to marry off the next daughter (16 years of age) in March 2012. The reasons stated for marrying off these daughters early ranged from the fact that the family had several girls to fears of eve teasing of unmarried girls. Among the richer families of Barhu, there was a trend of marrying off their sons early. This was because a certain standard of living ensured that they did not have to wait for a son to find a job and contribute monetarily to the family before marrying him off.

Interestingly therefore the survey revealed that while poverty forced many girl children into marrying early, affluence could also be the reason for marrying off children early. Moreover, poverty was not reported to be the only reason behind child marriages in the sample area. There were many instances of rich families indulging in the practice and there were a few cases of poor families not succumbing to the pressures. One of the poorer families in Angara chose to educate both their daughters (the other two of the four children being boys) in the face of grinding poverty, rather than marrying them off at a tender age.

It is important to note that often early marriage did not feature in the list of problems of the poor. In one of the villages, Angara, women did not see early marriage as a problem at all. Their list of issues they faced, and the prime among them was hunger and diminishing livelihood options, included matters which impact their lives in a much more profound way than child marriage.

#### **4. Absence of girls' and women's say in decision-making means perpetuation of early marriage**

*Hypothesis:* The agency of a woman in decision-making has been limited to household roles and when it comes to the question of marriage, brides hardly ever have a say and mothers' mostly if not always merely endorse the decisions taken by their husbands.

*Evidence from the Field:* As in most other parts of the country, marriage was not seen as a contract/ union between two consenting adults. It is more of a tie between two families/villages and a decision so big was almost never left to the boy or the girl but was taken by the elders (mostly male) of the family.

In discussions on the subject of decision making powers regarding marriage, several women in the sample areas were of the opinion that these were joint decisions, implying therefore that women did have a say. On further probing it was however clear that mothers of prospective brides almost never went to meet the prospective groom, relying completely on their husbands' assessment; they had no say in deciding the marriageable age of their daughters. These were unquestioned male prerogatives and a woman's role was limited to endorsing decisions taken by the male relatives.

The situation can be expressed in the light of an incident related by Saryu Ram of Dumar, who was part of a parallel grievance redressal mechanism – the Dumar Gram Vikas Samiti. When asked about women's participation in the samiti, he said there were 14 women in the 28-member samiti. When asked if they spoke at the meetings, he said they did. But when asked to mention one instance in which they differed from the male opinion he could not recount a single incident.

The fact that the decision regarding early marriage was exclusively a male domain and women had no say should not lead to the assumption that if women had a say, things would be any different. In course of the survey when women were asked to voice their opinion, it was invariably in favour of early marriage. More often, as in the case of Kiran Devi from Visar, women express their say in favour of early marriage of their daughters. "*Ladki ka mahina shuru hote hi uske liye ladka dhundna shuru kar denge.* (Once my daughter attains puberty, we will start looking for a groom for her)," she said, referring to her school-going daughter Kavita.

Cases of women married early recognising the need to delay their daughter's marriage were rare. Promila Devi of Barhu ensured that her daughter was educated - "What I couldn't enjoy in my own childhood; I want to give all that to my daughter". Rekha Devi of Bandarbela, who was married early and has two children, said her life's ambition was to ensure her children studied. Promila and Rekha were exceptions and women who had gone through the travails of early marriage were largely unable to comprehend the ills of the practice and take a stand against this practice. The fear of social condemnation and the apprehension of deviating from tradition seemed to force many women to toe the line when it came to marriage.

**Table 3. Role of mothers, girls and boys on decision-making related to marriage**

Marriage-Related Decision Making Pattern		
	Timing of Marriage	Choice of Groom/Bride
<b>Mother's say</b>	Mothers feel that they do have a say but their roles and agency is limited to endorsing their husbands' decisions.	Mothers never meet the prospective groom. The male members base any expression of opinion, mostly in the form of endorsement of the male members' opinion, entirely on the assessment of the groom.
<b>Girl's say</b>	The girl's consent is not even considered. In rare cases where girls voice their opinion against marriage, they are convinced by parents on one ground or another to agree to the marriage.	The girl's opinion is not considered of any consequence. In rare cases where they have a say their opinion of the groom is moulded by the assessment of the elders in the family.
<b>Boy's say</b>	Boys have very little say in the timing of the marriage. The decision is taken by the elders of the family, and depends on various factors.	Boys by and large have a greater say in the choice of the bride, as compared to girls. The final decision however is generally the family's decision.

It is interesting to note how the scenario with regard to women's agency in decision-making powers changed in the face of out-migration of the male members of the family. In the absence of the husband, the first power of decision-making falls with the woman's in-laws

(the girl's grandparents)– the father-in-law and the mother-in-law, in that order. In a few families, where the husband's parents were dead or did not live with them, the woman made decisions, albeit in discussion with her husband. This was seen in Charkitongra Toli in Sarauni, where several men had migrated to other cities. Only one woman, Geeta Devi, took decisions about property and children's education because her in-laws were dead.

It was common in the sample areas for young girls to learn about their wedding plans only on the day the groom's family came to 'see' them. This was especially common in Manpur block of Gaya and in Charkitongra toli in Hazaribagh Sadar among Yadavs, Paswans, and Mahatos. Rekha Devi from Bandarbela village was 14 when she got married. She got to know about her marriage when her in-laws came to see her. Pooja Devi of Kaiyyan got to know about her marriage on the day of the wedding. She was 11 at the time. Reena Kumari of Kharhari, who was 17 at the time of her marriage, learnt about her wedding 10 days before it.

In rare cases like village Bejnetata in Angara block of Ranchi, where girls seemed to have some space to exercise their choice, there were relatively more instances of girls continuing with education beyond Class 10. Sarita Devi (22) and Geeta Devi (19) were both doing their graduation. Sarita Devi had chosen her partner and Geeta Devi has rejected two proposals. Interestingly the same village reported several cases of elopement as well as inter-caste marriages. 13-year-old Manita fled with 17-year-old Sanjeev. They belonged to different castes. Lakhiram Mahato, an SC, married a 16-year-old tribal girl from the same village. In this village, when allowed to exercise a choice, girls were seen to be keen to break free of the traditions that had bound them.

Despite the overwhelming trend of girls toeing the line, being voiceless or not having decision making powers, there were a few instances of young girls defying tradition, fighting pressures to marry young, asserting their right to marry a person of their choice, or exercising discretion in ending a marriage. Sanita Kumari of Dumar threatened a hunger strike when pressurised to marry. She is now 19, studying, and unmarried. A girl from Dharampur, forcibly married to a person with disability, defied tradition and eloped with a boy of her choice before her gauna could happen. Guriya, a Class-12 student in Dharampur, married when she was 12 years old, refused to go to her in-law's place since her husband is a drug addict. Unfortunately however, sometimes an attempted suicide also failed to save unwilling girls from early marriage. Pooja Devi from Hazaribagh Sadar, when forced to marry against her wishes, attempted suicide. She was saved by her family members and convinced to marry the same groom.

**Table 4. The table below brings together areas where a girl's opinion may or may not be expressed and where they may or may not agree.**

Issues	Express/Do not express Opinion	Opinion accepted/not
Education	More girls express desire to study	This depends on other factors which may or may not lead to higher studies
Groom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Of late, more girls are asked about their choice of groom, specifically in communities closer to urban centres and in tribal/mixed villages.</li> <li>Girls in Gaya are not asked this</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acceptance depends on choice of groom, reason of rejection whether it conforms to family reasons or not.</li> <li>There are at least four cases of elopement</li> </ul>
Time of marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Once a girl turns 14-15, the hunt for groom begins. Her opinion is not sought</li> <li>In Gaya, at least two girls were not aware of their marriage till the last day. Several said they didn't want to marry</li> </ul>	Even in cases where girl does not want to marry, she is convinced to change her mind, or forced to accept the decision.
Number of children	Woman may not want to have a child	It is decision of husband and husband's family that matters. Maya Devi and Binulata's cases are pointers to this <sup>31</sup> .

<sup>31</sup> Maya Devi, a teacher at Dumar in Hazaribagh Sadar, wanted to have just two children. But she was under pressure from her family to have more children until she delivered a boy. She now has four



## 5. More girl children in family means a higher probability of early marriage

*Hypothesis:* The patriarchal desire for a male child results in a large number of children in the family. Several female children in the family are often a trigger for early marriage because it means arranging dowry for so many more.

*Evidence from the Field:* In the sample areas there was an unmistakable connection between early marriage and the number of female children per family. The greater the number of daughters in a family, the higher was the pressure on parents. So, there was a higher chance of marrying them off early.

Sushila, a 16-year-old in Visar, whose marriage had already been finalised during the interaction, explained that this was necessary because she had several sisters considered of

**'Beti ki shadi ho gayi to bolte hain ki Ganga nahaliya (Getting a daughter married off is as momentous as taking a dip in the Ganga)' – Dayal, SHG coordinator, Srijan Foundation**

marriageable age. Meera in Bejentata was married as early as 12 because she had three other sisters. In families with several daughters, the oldest is invariably married early. Parents with several daughters often said in course of discussions, '*Iski* (implying the oldest daughter) *shaadi karenge, tabhi baki ka dahej jama sakenge*' (if she is married off, only then can we start saving dowry for the rest). Very often this came as a breather for the younger daughters in the family, who were able to continue with education till it was their turn (for marriage).

Babita Kumari from Bandarbela is 17 years old. She continued with her education primarily because she was the youngest among three sisters. Similarly, for Rinki in Padma, being the youngest daughter was a blessing in terms of offering her the possibility of continuing with education till her parents arrange for dowry for the older sisters. Ironically Sarita Devi at Jagdishpur, who had dreamt of getting educated was married off at 11, while her younger sister, who was not keen to go to school was married at 14 after studying till Class 3.

At the root of this connection between several female children in a family and early marriage was the patriarchal obsession with the male child and the severely limited say women had in decisions regarding the number and also the spacing of their children. Maya Devi, a teacher who was married at 18 has three daughters and a son. She was compelled against her wishes to have four children until she gave birth to the male heir of the family. Binulata from Kharhari had two daughters and wanted no more children. Her in-laws denied her the freedom to decide about birth control measures and insisted on her continuing to give birth until she produced a son.

## 6. Notions of family honour and pride resting on control over girls' sexuality leads to early marriage

*Hypothesis:* Early marriage has been considered necessary for controlling girls' sexuality, which is intricately linked to notions of family honour and pride. Given the underlying notions around sexuality, chastity, the fear of pre-marital sexual activity and pregnancies, the fear of sexual assault, the patriarchal norm to 'tame' women and 'protect' them - child marriage is viewed as a potential solution to all these problems.

*Evidence from the Field:* Fierce monitoring and protection of the family as well as community honour in the sample areas, intricately revolving around notions of sexuality and pervasive fear of violation of norms with regard to sexuality, resulted in early marriage being seen as a safeguard against disrepute and dishonour. Lakhan Ram, an octogenarian from Jagdishpur, explained that a girl's honour was considered equivalent to the family's pride and any 'wrong action' on the girl's part could leave a '*daag*' (stain or blot) on the family's honour. "*Kuch galat*

children – three daughters and a son. Binulata, from Kharhari in Gaya, has two daughters and does not want to have more children. But her in-laws are not allowing her to have her tubectomy done as they want a grandson.

*na ho jaye*" (lest something wrong happen) was the fear echoed in discussions across locations. Interestingly there were differences in the perceptions between men and women on the 'wrong' that could happen to women, which could tarnish the pride of a family. Most male respondents equated 'wrong' with daughters and sisters eloping and/or indulging in premarital sex. Only female respondents perceived, in addition, that the 'wrong' could also include sexual abuse, violence and assault.

Through discussions, it emerged that a family's honour could be sullied in several ways:

- Inter-caste marriage
- Elopement
- Promiscuity
- Molestation, Assault etc
- Remaining Single/Unmarried
- Violation by girls of the norms regarding code of conduct

Girls at a discussion in Kasturba Gandhi Balika Awasiye Vidhyalaya, Padma, pointed out that inter-caste marriages were against the norm. They explained that the fear of young girls defying custom by opting for inter-caste marriage, thereby bringing shame to the family, was one of the main reasons why girls were married young.

State interventions to promote inter-caste marriages made no dent in the sample areas, where the institution of marriage continues to be caste endogamous. At Barhu in Kanke, respondents during an FGD condemned Arjun Munda's Kanyadaan scheme for girls, saying it promoted girls to marry inter-caste against their parents' choice. During discussions with Yadav and Paswan communities of Visar, it emerged that while there is no open animosity between the communities and they often faced and fought problems together, contracting marriages is unthinkable. In Jagdishpur, Rupan on her free will, married a boy from a different caste when she was 20. Her sister Sunita was soon after married to a rich widower with two children when she was just 16. Her brother says the family took this step out of fear of ostracism. To prevent situations like those created by Rupan's inter caste marriage, families play it safe and marry off their daughters' young.

The ostracism that came in wake of an inter-caste marriage was more severe for the poor. During an FGD at Kharhari, it was pointed out that whether an inter-caste marriage was accepted or not depends on whether it takes place in a rich or a poor family. A community member said that there was a local proverb which implied that the rich could do anything but nothing happened to them; It was only when the poor defied custom that they get ostracised and discriminated against. Still another determinant of the degree of ostracism that a family has to put up with in face of children opting for inter-caste love marriages is the gender of the child. Families of the girl child faced a disproportionately larger quantum of ostracism and ire of the community. "Beta ko nahin tyagte hain, par beti ko tyag dete hain (It is not the son who is stigmatised, it is always the daughter)," a respondent at an FGD said in Dharampur.

Early marriage was also considered a safe alternative to circumvent the growing trend<sup>32</sup> of young girls and boys eloping to escape the dictates of caste driven marriages and other associated customs which deny them a say in choosing their partners. The shame associated with such cases was mentioned in course of discussions.

The pervasive fear of sexual assault of any kind on a girl and the associated shame and '*daag* (stain)' on family honour was another trigger for early marriage. Parents felt their daughters would be better off and safer with a regular male guardian. Since fathers and brothers could not provide this guardianship for long, the onus of protecting the daughter's honour was best shifted to her marital family at the earliest opportunity.

Added to all this was what the community thought of as a compelling need to ensure young girls do not deviate from socially accepted and carefully nurtured norms of behaviour. Deviant behaviour could range from a young girl choosing to drive a bike (Sanita from Dumar, who rides a Hero Honda bike) to another young girl merely interacting with boys. '*Haath se nikal*

<sup>32</sup> Both inter caste marriages as well as cases of elopement were particularly high in Bejnetata – a village in Angara in Ranchi.

*gayee hai* (She has gone out of hand)' is a common phrase to condemn violation of the behaviour code and this fear of parents with girl children is yet another trigger for early marriage.

## 7. Absence of spaces/avenues for Intermixing between girls and boys leads to factors that push them towards early marriage

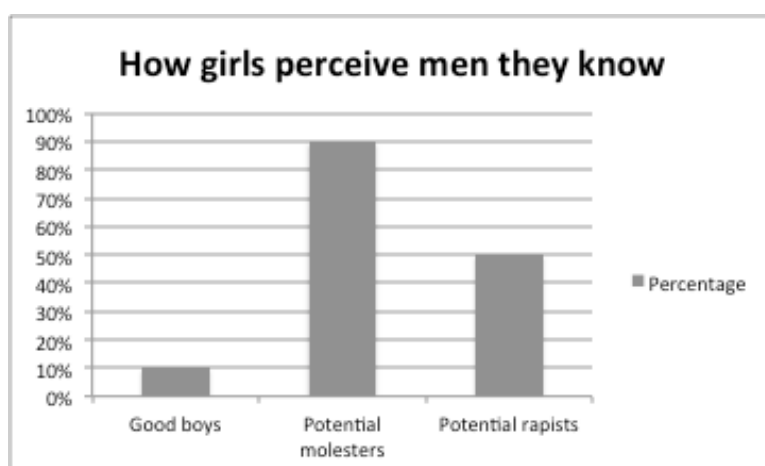
*Hypothesis:* Mixing between girls and boys has often been seen as taboo in many cultures, where marriage is seen as the only socially acceptable forum for a girl and boy to mix, interact socially or even explore their sexuality. This triggers a few trends that are frowned upon – that of exploring one's sexuality through channels of eve teasing, having friends of the opposite sex or engaging in premarital sexual relations. While the first has been seen as insecurity for the girl and the second as unhealthy behaviour, the third trend is seen as stigma not only for the girl, but for her family, too. This insecurity has been cited in several studies as a push factor for early marriage.<sup>33</sup>

*Evidence from the field:* The lack of spaces for girls and boys to mix and the lack of recognition of certain natural tendencies to express and explore one's sexuality led to grey areas of contact, eve-teasing and an uncomplimentary image of the opposite sex among many things. This in turn fuelled a stricter control the family tried to exert over the girl by marriage and imposing taboos, perpetuating a vicious cycle.

Incidents of eve-teasing were common among the sample communities in Gaya and Jharkhand. While the girls in Visar shared that boys created a new parody with which to eve-tease girls for every new situation, in the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Awasiye Vidyalaya in Padma, the girls said boys would wait outside the school everyday to watch the school girls. The girls however admitted that they missed the attention the day the boys did not come.

The girls at the school identified the various forms of violence they faced or had heard of being perpetrated by men – verbal violence, brushing against them, grabbing them and molestation/rape. Based on this understanding, 23 girls listed out their perception of the men they knew, listing 90% of them as potential molesters and only 10% as good boys or those who would not indulge in such activities.

The findings are presented in the diagram below.



This mind-set and attitude contributed to a community-level fear of eve-teasing in general and of the need to protect women in particular. Sushila of Visar, for instance, said her father cited eve teasing as the main reason they did not delay her marriage.

<sup>33</sup> Baseline survey on prevalence of violence and abuse against children at family, community and institutions; Abul Barkat et al; 2007; Human Development Research Centre; Harassment: The effects of "eve teasing" on development in Bangladesh; Emma Weisfeld-Adams; 2008; The Hunger Project; <http://www.thp.org/files/Harassment.pdf> Early Marriage Child Spouses in Innocenti Digest No 7, March 2001; UNICEF



Eve teasing was generally targeted at unmarried girls according to the school-going children in Padma.<sup>34</sup> They pointed out that married girls looked different. They dressed differently. However, they pointed out that even married women at times faced physical and sexual abuse.

Then again, in Jharkhand, there were places where the residential schools were existent. There was a higher rate of school-going girls here as they did not have to deal with the usual problems associated with commuting through unsafe spaces.

#### **8. Caste has been a determinant in early marriage with the people of scheduled castes and backward classes more likely to get their daughters married off early**

*Hypothesis:* Literature reveals that caste has been a strong and significant influence on the age at marriage. Members of scheduled castes and tribes and other backward classes are between a third and a half more likely as high-caste women to marry before age 18 in 2005-2006.

Findings from the field: Though the study found the linkage between caste and early marriage to be present, there were several examples of people belonging to some backward or scheduled castes not engaging in the practice. Interactions with various stakeholders led to suggestions that marriages were marginally earlier among caste groups than tribal groups. This said, there were tribal groups such as the Mahatos among whom the age at marriage of girls was as low as 14, the same as those in SC groups like the Bhuiyans.

At Jitu, a Munda village in Ranchi district, girls as young as 14-15 were married off, whereas as, among the same tribal group in a mixed village (Bejnetata) in the same district, the age at marriage was substantially higher among girls. Two of the respondents, Geeta Devi and Sarita Devi, were above 20 years of age and unmarried. The distinction acknowledged by the villagers was that the distance from the bigger towns and accessibility to urban influences influenced the age at marriage.<sup>35</sup>

Within the caste groups, too, there were differences. Age at marriage was delayed among the Ravidas community in Hazaribagh. A school principal from the same community, who had got married at the age of 28, pointed out that this was because of a trend of educating their children which brought about change in these communities.

**Table 5. Differences in early marriage practices in castes and tribes in Ranchi district<sup>36</sup>**

<b>Caste/tribal/ religious group</b>	<b>Age at marriage of girls</b>	<b>Say of girls in decisions relating to marriage</b>	<b>Who conducts the marriage and where</b>	<b>Dowry practices</b>
Mundas (Tribals)	14-15* 15-16** 19-20***	No say	Paahans or priests at home	Rs 15-20k
Oraons	19-20***	”	Paahans/priests at home	

<sup>34</sup> A representative from Kalyan Parishad said the vermilion mark on a woman's head (indicating her married status) protected her from harassment in public space.

<sup>35</sup> Madhusudhan, husband of Mukhiya Seema Devi of Angara village, pointed out that influences of city life and modern living had helped push back the age of marriage over the past five to 10 years.

<sup>36</sup> The data is based on FGDs in various locations in Ranchi district.

Lohra (Tribals)	15-16 <sup>*</sup> 16-17 <sup>**</sup>	”	--	Rs 20-30k
Mahato (OBC)	14-15 <sup>*</sup> 17-18 <sup>**</sup>	”	Thakurs/priests at home or temple	Rs 50k
Nayak (SC)	17-18 <sup>*/**</sup>	”	”	Rs 30-40k
Kumhar (SC)	15-16 <sup>*</sup>	”	”	--
Rajputs (General)	18-19 <sup>*</sup> 20-21 <sup>**</sup>	”	”	Rs 1-2 lakh
Sahu (General)	18+ <sup>*/**</sup>	”	”	Rs 1-2 lakh
Muslims	17-18 <sup>*/**</sup> 18+ <sup>****</sup>	”	Home, with religious leader and community elders <sup>****</sup>	Earlier meher or bride price, now dowry exchange <sup>****</sup>

- \* Taati Silvay village in Ranchi  
 \*\* Rukka village in Ranchi  
 \*\*\* Nava Toli in Ranchi  
 \*\*\*\* Barhu in Kanke block, Ranchi

**Table 6. Differences in early marriage practices in castes and tribes in Hazaribagh district<sup>37</sup>**

Caste/tribal/religious group	Age at marriage of girls	Say of girls in decisions relating to marriage	Who conducts the marriage and where	Dowry practices
Manjhis (Tribals)	12+ <sup>**</sup>	No say	Thakurs/pandits	Generally not practised
Birhor (Subgroup of the Munda tribe)	14+ <sup>**</sup>	”	--	”
Paswan (SC)	15-16 <sup>**</sup>	”	Thakurs pandits at temple or home	Rs 30-40k
Bhuiyyan (OBC)	16 <sup>**</sup>	”	Thakurs/priests at home or temple	Rs 30k
Yadav (OBC)	13-14 <sup>**</sup>	”	”	--
Ravidas (SC)	18-19 <sup>*</sup>	”	”	Rs 8-10 lakh, bike etc

- \*\* Ichhak in Hazaribagh  
 \* Dumar/Sarauni in Hazaribagh

<sup>37</sup> This data is based on FGDs in various locations across three blocks of Hazaribagh – Padma, Hazaribagh Sadar and Ichhak.

In Gaya, among the Thakurs and Yadavs, there was a tradition to get their daughters married off early. While the average age of marriage at a Yadav village cluster in Gaya was as low as 14, with some girls being married off as young as 12, the age at marriage among the neighbouring Paswan cluster was marginally better at 14-15. NGOs in Gaya agreed that early marriage cut across castes, with Brahmins also marrying off their daughters early. However, they said the problem was worse among the Scheduled Castes and the Mahadalits, with the age at marriage dipping to 10-12 in some cases. The marriages across the castes were solemnised by Thakurs or pandits, with ceremonies being held at home, or in the nearby temples. The Vishnupad temple in Gaya was said to be notorious for the large number of early marriages that were conducted during the marriage season.

Among the religious groups, Hindus were said to be the worst off with Muslims following second and Christians showing a higher age of marriage. However, no Christian respondents were interviewed in the course of the study.

### **Some other factors affecting early marriage that emerged from the field visit**

#### **Need for a Female Hand to Take Care of Household Chores**

The need for a female in a household also was the reason for early marriages. In situations when mothers of young children died/fell sick, or a daughter-in-law died leaving behind a husband and several children, quick marriages of eligible boys in the family were considered a practical solution. The daughter-in-law came in handy to take care of the family. At times, in families where men migrated for work, a daughter-in-law was brought in to take care of the old/widowed mother. Among the poor, this often also meant an extra hand to help earn a living. A discussion with functionaries of an NGO revealed that a large number of marriages were contracted during *dhan katai* (harvest season) as a daughter-in-law during such times meant an extra hand and additional wages. The need for a female hand in all such scenarios became an opportunity for parents of young girls to get rid of their economic burdens (daughters).

#### **Link with Migration**

Migration also was seen to impact early marriage in various ways. Absence of a male figure in the family compounded the insecurities and fears regarding the safety and honour of the girl child and resulted in marriages being arranged even at a tender age. The timing of marriages was invariably determined on the basis of the annual (sometimes once in two to three years) home visit of the male guardian. Then, the age of the girl child was of little consideration. Usha and Lalita of Charkitongra Toli will be married this year when their father, who currently works in Odisha would return home.

On the other hand, young men intending to migrate for work were sometimes married off before they left the safe precincts of the community. Fear of migrating young men going astray, entering into sexual relationships with girls outside the community and the belief that a young bride waiting for them at home would ward off wrong temptations of any kind led to situations where marriages were contracted. The dangers of promiscuity in such men leading to spread of sexual diseases to their wives was listed as a cause of concern in Jharkhand by NGO Pradan.

#### **Grooms from Other States Seeking Brides in the Sample Area**

The research team came across several cases of grooms from other states (primarily Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana) marrying girls in Bihar and Jharkhand. These men usually not only paid for the wedding, but also the bride.

In some such cases, the bride's family lost touch with the girl after her marriage, triggering rumours that she could have been trafficked. In others, girls thus offered in marriage to men from other states were known to be well-settled. However, there was an easily blurred line between trafficking and marriages of this kind that opened up the scope for further research. In many discussions on this subject, fear about the safety of girls offered in such marriages to men who come seeking brides, came up for discussion. A vigilante group, Gram Vikas Samiti,

was formed in Dumar to look into such marriages and verify the antecedents of the groom. The group worked to convince parents not to get their girls married if the groom was much older. However, Shaqibullah of Women's Development Corporation, the nodal agency for women and child issues in Bihar, said it was common among Muslim families, too and in these cases the grooms were much older than the brides.

## **Part II – Impact Theories**

### **1. Health Impact of Early Marriage**

*Hypothesis:* The literature on early marriage is replete with studies, which have shown the devastating health impact of early marriage on girls. The sexual reproductive health approach to early marriage has established the fact that all aspects of reproductive and sexual health are adversely affected. These range from early and repeated sexual relations and consequently pregnancies among physically and psychologically immature girls; limited access to contraception and sexual health information; the risks associated with early pregnancy and child birth; the higher probability of maternal mortality, and infant mortality; the impact on childhood care; and a greater risk to HIV infection.

*The Many Realities:* Given the established impact of early marriage on health, the research team, in the course of discussions with the community, made an effort to probe how far the adverse health consequences of early marriage were recognised, whether there was sufficient awareness on these and whether there was condemnation of the adverse health impact of early marriage.

Among the groups interviewed, there was near universal acknowledgement of the adverse health impact of teenage pregnancies. Despite the fact that it was widely understood that teenage pregnancies were not good for the mother or the child, there was absolutely no condemnation of teen pregnancies, which were in fact a common occurrence. There was very little dissemination of any information that compared survivability of children or mothers from late pregnancies to early ones. There was instead a quiet, perhaps resigned attitude of acceptance. An old woman (50 years) looking at her daughter (36 years), said she was not even 13, when she delivered her, and added, "*hum dono theek hain*" (we are both fine). In a situation where nearly everybody was born too early in their mother's lives, the negative impact of teenage pregnancies is not an issue of concern.

Several cases of deaths of infants and young mothers were reported. Meera of Bejnetata, who was married at age 12, had a baby boy within two years of marriage. The boy died soon after birth. Sarita Devi's baby girl died when Sarita was 16. In Bejnetata again, there was a girl who was married at 12 and had a child at 13. While the baby survived, the mother died. Unfortunately, however, these deaths were not understood by and large as a consequence of teenage pregnancies.

### **2. Impact on Education of Girls**

*Hypothesis:* Time and again in reports and scholarly studies on early marriage, the practice has been denounced on account of its negative impact on education of girls. It has been commonly agreed that the practice of marrying off girls young, is a violation of their right to education.

*The Many Realities:* The research team came across several cases where girls' education had been disrupted by early marriage. Certain assumptions about the impact of early marriage on education of girls was however found to be only partly correct at times and some scenarios listed below were found to be areas of enormous concern which have not been sufficiently dealt with in studies on early marriage.

In the entire sample area, as discussed in a previous section, communities had by and large failed to understand the significance of educating the girl child. While some basic education was considered necessary, its utility was mostly measured only in terms of an educated girl's value in the marriage market. Too much education was seen as a liability. Education was not valued for its role in equipping girls to become financially independent. Unfortunately, a majority of the young girls had themselves imbibed these attitudes. The situation therefore was not as simplistic as usually believed. It was certainly not a scenario where all girls and all parents of girl children saw early marriage as a violation of the right to education; and the enormity of the loss to the girl child was far from understood. Women during discussions often said that the loss to the girl child who was denied education was not much and that education was not going to take them too far in any case.

Again the entire literature on early marriage and its effect on education largely focused on how the practice was the reason for girls dropping out of schools. The study however had shown other areas of concern as well. The practice of *gauna /rusgaddi* in certain belts of the sample, like Gaya, gave girls the opportunity to continue with education even after marriage. This raised the question of whether *gauna /rusgaddi* can/should be applauded as a practice which managed to undo the damage inflicted by early marriage on girls' education. In situations where *gauna/rusgaddi* gave girls a breather to continue with schooling, the effect of a marriage had also to be seen in terms of its distraction effect. Several times in the course of discussions, especially in Gaya, community members explained how a marriage adversely affected performance in schools by affecting the ability of young girls as well as boys to concentrate on studies. A school teacher in Visar said his nephew who got married five months back to a 16-year-old would be appearing for his Class 12 exams in March. His wife was appearing for Class 10 exams at the same time. But he felt his nephew's frequent visits to his wife was affecting the education of both the bride as well as the groom. Still another scenario, though very rare was of in-laws endorsing and financing the education of their daughters-in law and husbands encouraging their wives to study. If communities showcased these instances and argued that early marriage need not necessarily disrupt a girl's education, such practices could have an adverse impact.

### 3. Impact on Status of Women

*Hypothesis:* It has been argued that early marriage adversely impacts the status of women in society. Young married girls are more powerless in their relationships with their husbands and in-laws. Two main ways in which early marriage is known to depress the status of women have been discussed in the section below - limited decision making power and limited mobility. Young brides are known on one hand, to have fewer decision-making powers primarily because of their lack of experience, education and say in the marital family as also because of the financial dependence on their husbands. On the other, their limited mobility clubbed with the burden of household chores and responsibilities is known to severely impact their life opportunities.

*The Many Realities:* Pinki was 16 when she got married. Though she was aware of the fact that unprotected sex could lead to pregnancy, she did not insist on condom use. It could not be established beyond doubt whether Pinki's lack of decision making power was due to her young age, the fact that she was less educated than her husband, the fact that she was not financially independent at the time of her marriage or whether it was an interplay of all reasons that made Pinki not even consider asserting herself over an issue which could have severe implications on her life.

The research team came across several examples of educated and working women who had no decision-making powers regarding the number and spacing of their children. Maya, a teacher by profession was forced by her husband and in-laws to have several children out of the desire for a male heir to the family. The case of an ASHA who had five daughters was particularly ironic because she had lost the moral standing to speak to people about family planning and good childbearing practices. There was still another scenario where relatively older, educated and/or financially independent married women with relatively greater decision

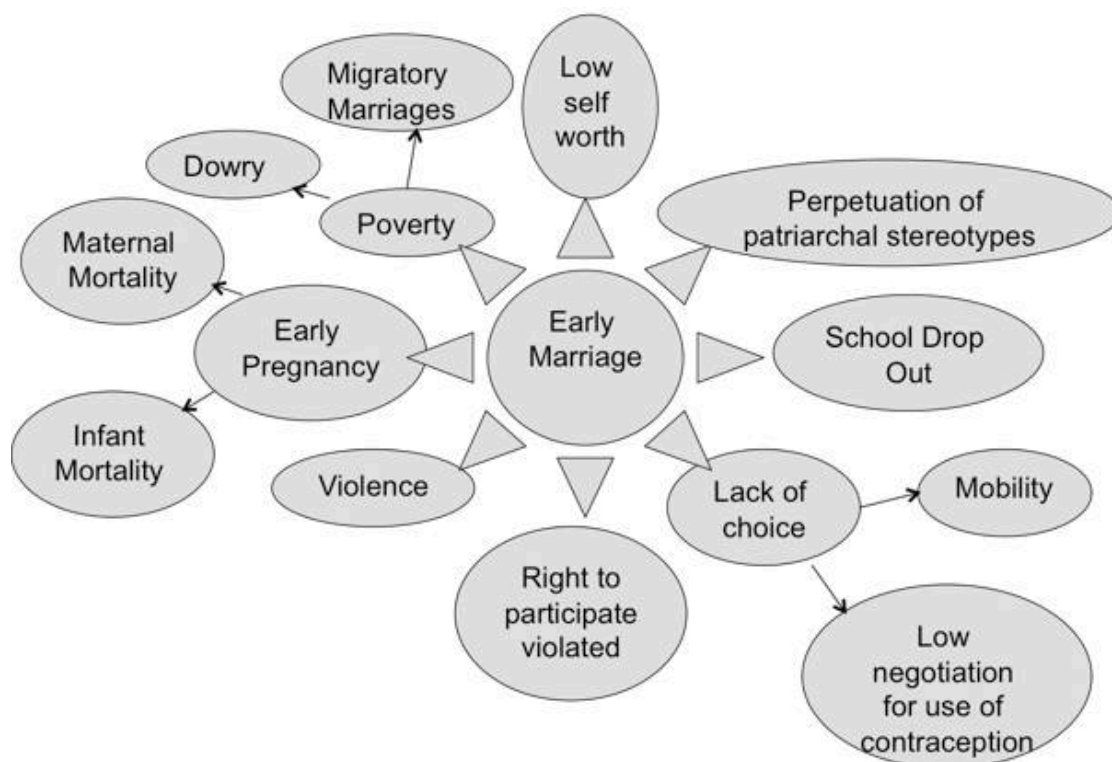
making powers ended up making or endorsing the same decisions (which could range from having many children out of hopes of having a male child to marrying their daughters at a tender age) which were mostly thrust upon women by patriarchal structures and ideology. Similarly, the assumption that women's lack of decision-making power resulted in early marriage also does not hold. The survey revealed that many older women who were married young endorsed early marriage for their daughters.

Early marriage was similarly known to adversely impact the status of women by limiting their mobility. Permission had to be sought from in-laws for things as elementary as visiting their parental homes. A range of services available to other sections of the population, including basic health care and access to formal or informal education, was known to be simply unavailable to young brides. Interaction with the community in the sample areas revealed that it was not so prominent and not always a loss of mobility due to early marriage as due to one's sex. Unmarried young girls too had severely limited mobility. Marriage did sometimes afford greater mobility to young women. Married women moving around with or without male escorts, was seen as less of a potential threat to family honour. Certain kinds of activities and chores were supposedly the preserve of married girls for instance fetching firewood from the forests.

Early marriage undoubtedly added to the burden of household chores and responsibilities on young girls. Women explained that while at a parent's house there was an element of choice in performing chores, at an in-law's place it was a compulsion and an issue of obedience. But again the assumption that young girls missed out on opportunities because of the chores and responsibilities which came their way in wake of a early marriage was tenuous. There was very little that came their way whether they were married or not.

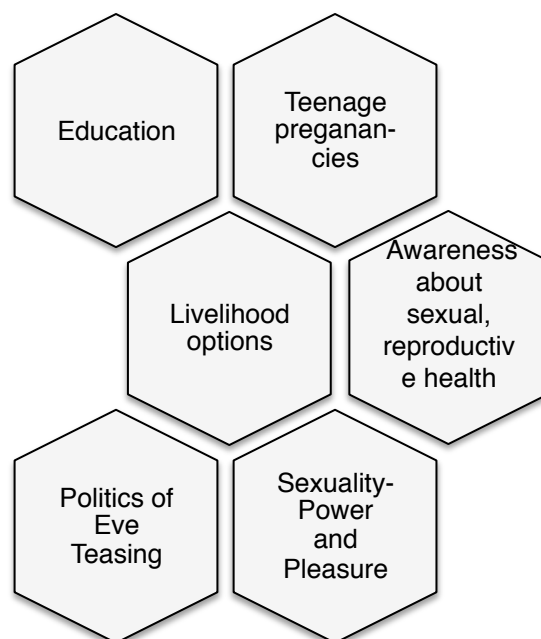
### Part III - Entry Points

Based on the analysis from the field report as outlined above and the interactions with the community in the three districts, some factors that are associated with early marriage came to the fore. These are represented in the diagram below:





The above interventions<sup>38</sup> were bundled together into six possible entry points that bring together the other factors under a common head.



The NGOs visited during the field visits came up with areas of intervention where they have either initiated some of these issues during their work on early marriage or related issues or have worked in these specific areas. These are listed in the table below:

**Table 8. Interventions on which NGOs are working or which they feel can curb early marriage**

Intervention NGOs	Education	Teen Pregnancies	Livelihoods	Sexual health awareness	Eve- teasing	Sexuality
<b>RANCHI</b>						
Unicef	√√*	√*	√	√	x*	x
CINI	√√	√	√√	√	x	xx*
Manthan	√	x	√	x	x	x
LEADS	√	√√	√	x	x	x
KGVK	√	√√	√√	√√	x	x
<b>HAZARIBAGH</b>						
Srijan Foundation	√√	√√	√√	√	x	x
Samadhan		√	√		x	x
SUPPORT	√	√	√√	x	x	x
Serve Seva	√	√	√√		x	x
Pradan	√	√	√√	√	√	x
<b>GAYA</b>						
Tathagat Foundation	√	√	√√	x	x	x
Nav Nirman Kendra	√√	√	√√	x	x	x
Kalyan Parishad	√	√	√√	x	x	x
Sugam Jagriti	√	√	√√	x	x	x
WCD	√	√√	√√	√√	x	x
PGVS	√√	√√	√	x	x	x

<sup>38</sup> The interventions have been detailed out in Annexure 1

√√ - Areas where the NGO has been working  
√ - Interventions that this NGO has seen other NGOs working on  
x - Interventions have not been made as yet  
xx - CINI has worked on the area of sexuality. But none of its current interventions focus on it

Interventions in these areas and a 100-year-old law notwithstanding, early marriage was still highly prevalent across the surveyed locations. An interaction with UNICEF staff in Ranchi shed some light on an important aspect of change in the current practice.

Drawing a trajectory between open defecation, dowry and early marriage, three areas that have seen a large-scale intervention by governments as well as non-governmental organisations, one can see how behaviour change operates with regard to different issues.

While open defecation in India sees an explicit acknowledgement at the level of the community as well as the individual that it is a wrong practice, dowry is largely not considered as wrong. It has a social acceptance that is reflected in an individual's acceptance of dowry as a necessary evil. As a respondent at a focus group discussion in Bandarbela in Hazaribagh said: "The groom will feed your daughter and take care of her for the rest of his life, so what is wrong if you pay him some dowry?"

Clearly, it is easier to effect change in terms of a practice that has social un-acceptance than one where there is social sanction. In the context of early marriage, despite universal awareness that it is illegal, there is the need to conform to social tradition. This is reflected in the oft-repeated refrain – '*karna padta hai* (it has to be done)'. For any of the above interventions to succeed, there has to be change at the level of the individual as well as that of the community. Here, there can be a behavioural change attached to the way a girl is perceived, the pressures cited for marrying her off early and the need for conformity, only if change happens in social norms that govern these beliefs.

Here, what Paolo Mefalopulos from UNICEF suggested in a blog on the social norms and behavioural change in the context of open defecation was equally applicable. He located the success of any development intervention on the twin foundations of need for change in social norms and associated benefits for the individual. Most individuals were willing to change behaviour not only if they were able to see a definite benefit in that change, but also if they were convinced that other people will do the same.<sup>39</sup>

These twin pillars of change can be seen as interventions required at two levels – individual and social. Extending educational benefits for girls till graduation or further, monetary benefits to families who delay the marriage of their girls and other such sops woo individuals to opt for change. Targeting people through self-help groups by creating awareness among members about the problems of early marriage can also make an impact. But to acquire a larger reach, there is the need for change in social norms. Facilitating change at a collective level and showcasing these experiences of change from within the community through discussions and deliberations, trainings or messaging, could go a longer way in making change go beyond numbers. As several of the NGOs and community members agreed, there is the need to focus on changing the mind-set that currently sees the girls as a burden.

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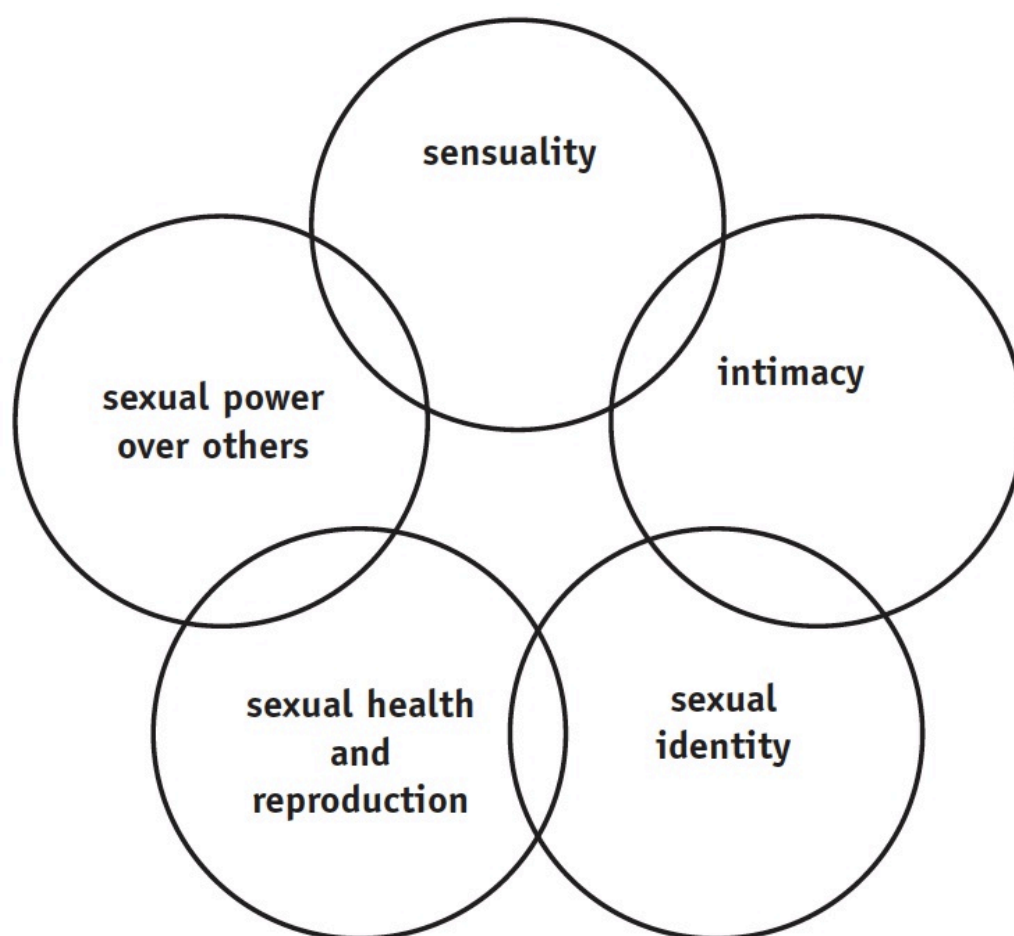
<sup>39</sup> The Role of Social Norms in Achieving Behaviour Change, Paolo Mefalopulos;  
<http://blogs.worldbank.org/publicsphere/node/5783>



## 5. Recommendations for Breakthrough

The six entry points classified above have some areas of prolonged interventions by various NGOs either working on the issue of early marriage or on related focus areas of education, child rights or women's empowerment. However, there are clearly some areas, where the focus is absent – the broad umbrella of sexuality. Instances of exercising sexual power over others and lack of spaces for expressing or exploring one's sexuality gives rise to increased examples of stigma associated with an unmarried girl for fear of the dangers she invites – by promiscuity, inter-caste marriages, eloping or sexual harassment.

To explain early marriage from the lens of sexuality, the ISOFI<sup>40</sup> circles of sexuality (image below) can be brought into the study. The ISOFI toolkit explains sensuality, intimacy, sexual identity, sexual power over others and sexual health and reproduction as components of the circles of sexuality.



In the context of early marriage, these components are significant. For girls who are being married at an early age, their awareness about their bodies or sexual needs or the intimacy shared with a partner is almost absent. It is instead reflected in a relationship of power – outside marriage, it carries with it the threat of sexual violence and the attached stigma that aggravates early marriage. Within marriage it is reflected in a lack of choice with regard to decisions and awareness on sexual and reproductive health or factors governing sexual relations.

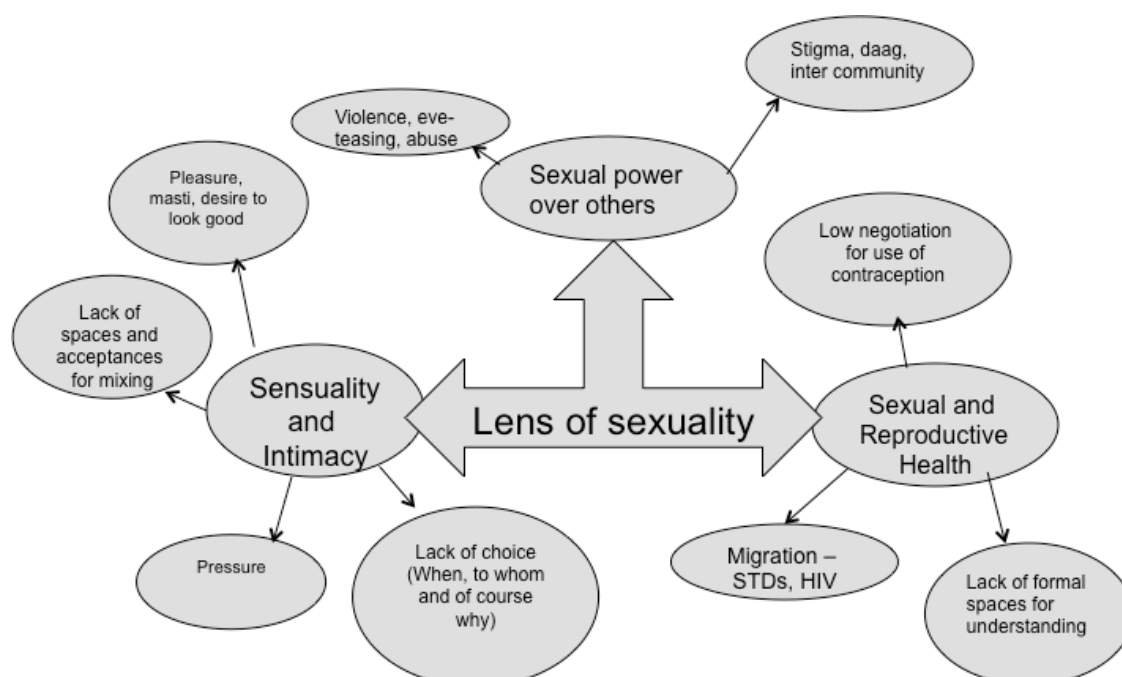
This can be explained further with the help of the two figures below.

<sup>40</sup> The Inner Spaces Outer Faces Initiative (ISOFI) toolkit to explain gender and sexuality was developed by ICRW and CARE.

## Looking at early marriage from the lens of sexuality

<b>Sensuality and Intimacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complex understanding of marriage from the perspective of it fulfilling certain needs and desires</li> <li>• Desire to look good. Awareness and feeling about one's own body; Its relation to decisions on marriage.</li> <li>• Lack of spaces for mixing of different sexes and how society sees it (Badnami associated with girls). Difference between tribals, non-tribals</li> <li>• <b>Decisions on marriage, whether, when and with whom?</b></li> </ul>
<b>Sexual Health and Reproduction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus is on teen pregnancies</li> <li>• Understanding sexual expressions, anatomy, contraceptives, source and access to these information and choices on acting upon this information</li> <li>• Perception related to birth control operations;</li> <li>• <b>Decisions on whether, when and how many children? Who decides on use of contraceptives, method or timing of birth control operations, who gets them done.</b></li> </ul>
<b>Power Over Others</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on presence of physical, emotional and sexual abuse and harassment - and their relations within marriage</li> <li>• <b>Impact on mobility, education and economic independence</b></li> <li>• Impact on issues of stigma, family honour through direct or indirect community pressure on individuals and families</li> <li>• <b>Drivers for stigma related to early marriage, girl as burden, girl as liability, girl as responsibility/duty of father to husband</b></li> </ul>

Locating the study in the three bands of sexuality explained in the table above, the sensuality and intimacy aspect can be related to decisions regarding choice of partner or time of marriage for the girl. These are often denied to the girl child and are taken on her behalf by the father or other male relatives in a decision seen as meant to be for the greatest good of the girl. The past few decades have focused on one aspect of the second band of sexual and reproductive health – teen pregnancies. What these initiatives have missed out is the lack of agency of a girl/woman in decisions on use of contraceptives, birth control measures and childbirth, which are often left out of the woman's ambit. The last band of sexual power over others is seen in the context of the immense impact its many possibilities has on the family that decides to marry off a young girl to provide her a 'secure' future. It also impacts the reduced mobility of the girl both before and after marriage. These are summarised below.



## Entry points

Given the strength areas of Breakthrough and current gaps in the interventions as expressed above, there is the scope for two main entry points for intervention:

1. Working with men and boys to facilitate a behavioural change in their attitude towards issues of early marriage to not only seeing it as a problem that goes beyond the realm of women, but also seeing themselves as play a crucial role in changing the existing scenario
2. Working on gender and sexuality to influence change at the collective as well as individual level to ensure that a sustainable environment of change is created – one that transcends issue of early marriage to look at women's empowerment too.

The aim is not just to have men speak about women's issues, their rights and dignity<sup>41</sup>, but also have them champion violence-free lives for women. Such interventions can help address the physical and sexual abuse of girls within and outside marriage, attached insecurities that lead to early marriage and enable boys and men to take proactive steps to reduce the practice.

## Some intervention options are listed below:

### (a) Engaging on issues of sexual harassment faced by girls

A perceived or real fear of harassment of girls triggered incidence of early marriage in communities and led to reduced access of the girl for education and opportunities for work. Several communities mentioned this insecurity as a chief factor to get girls married off and the need for a more secure environment for their development

### (b) Engaging to ensure respect for “yet to be married adolescent girls”

Instances of families keen to make their daughter study further but succumbing to community pressure to get her married off are not uncommon. Girls who were unmarried till at least 18 spoke about the negative way in which the community perceived them and the need for change of that attitude

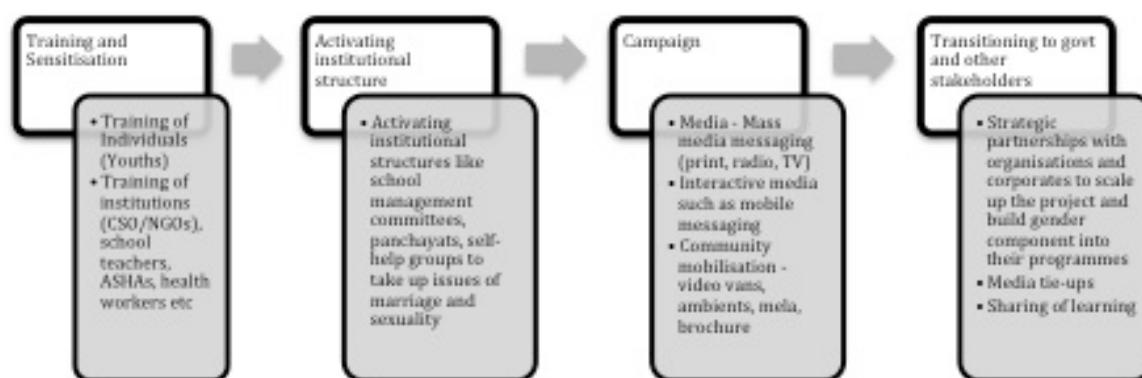
### (c) Engaging on the issue of lack of agency of the girl at home in decisions affecting her life

Girls and women expressed the need to be given a voice in decisions affecting their lives, be it education, work or the question of when and whom to marry

### (d) Engaging with empowered collectives/individuals

NGOs such as CINI, as well as respondents from the community suggested the possibility of having role models of individuals or groups that have successfully stood against the pressure of early marriage, publicise their experiences and get them to work with girls and families

In discussions with Breakthrough team, the following four tracks of engagement emerged:



In parallel, there can be direct advocacy with the government on incorporating a gender rights component in training modules for ASHAs, ANMs. Through the multi-pronged programme strategy that Breakthrough evolves, it hopes to reach out to the set of stakeholders short-listed in the tables below (as expressed by the communities in the three locations and the NGOs working with them).

<sup>41</sup> 'We men have to be bold, to speak the truth and stand up for the rights of girls and women to equality, dignity and the rights we all share.' Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as part of his campaign to end early marriage.

**Table 9. Stakeholders Breakthrough reaches out to**

<b>Individuals</b>	
1	Young girls (Age 12-21)
2	Young boys (Age 12-21)
3	Fathers
4	Mothers
5	Middlemen/Agua
6	Dai/Midwife
7	Village headman/community leaders
<b>Collectives/ Organisations/ Institutions</b>	
1	Schools (Teachers, School Management Committees, Village education committees)
2	Health workers (ASHA, ANM)
3	Police stations (Chowkidars, Child protection officers)
4	Religious institutions (Priests)
5	PanchayatSamiti
6	ICDS centres
7	Corporates
8	Administrative officers – BDO
9	Local media groups
10	Local CSOs

**Table 10. Content of training modules that the Breakthrough programme team has identified for various stakeholders**

	<b>Trainees</b>	<b>Content of module</b>	<b>Training components</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Outcome indicators</b>
1	Youth (16-21)	Complete understanding of rights, gender, and sexuality and how it influences EM  Ill-effect of EM, role they can play in empowering women, preventing violence against women; Who to approach in case of EM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Training workshops</li> <li>Mentoring</li> <li>Support building</li> <li>Pamphlets and brochures through educational institutions</li> <li>Active in community mobilisation activities</li> </ul>	During the project period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exhibit interest in skill building - communications and negotiation</li> <li>Youth engage with peers, family members and community on the issue</li> <li>Youth participate voluntarily in Breakthrough activities eg scale up, internet, video van</li> <li>Some youth act to ensure they and peers/community don't practice EM, demonstrate respect to women and their value, decrease in sexual harassment, and other of the 4 key areas</li> <li>Community see these youth as role models</li> <li>Youth become agents of change by being able to take a stand against EM &amp; influence others and are sensitised to issues of gender rights/violence</li> </ul>
2	CSO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complete</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporate aspects of</li> </ul>

	<b>Trainees</b>	<b>Content of module</b>	<b>Training components</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Outcome indicators</b>
	leaders/ staff	understanding of rights, gender, and sexuality and how it influences EM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ That early marriage is illegal; What they should do in case there is solemnising of EM whom they should reach etc?</li> </ul>			gender/sexuality/rights as part of their work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Incorporate gender policy in organisation, influence other stakeholders (eg govt, other CSOs) - scale and sustain</li> <li>▪ Partner with Breakthrough to run community mobilization activities around early marriage.</li> </ul>
3	School teachers	Understanding of rights, gender, and sexuality and how it influences EM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Train educational institutions</li> <li>▪ Strategic Partnership with educational institutions</li> </ul>		School teachers aware of issues of EM and can be agents of change by being support system for their students (youth)
4	SHG leaders	That early marriage is illegal; What they should do in case there is solemnising of EM whom they should reach etc?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Orientation</li> <li>▪ Training</li> <li>▪ Disseminate materials</li> <li>▪ Participate in community mobilisation</li> </ul>		SHG has a discussion on this and become agents of change
6	Corporates	That early marriage is illegal; What they should do in case there is solemnising of EM whom they should reach etc?	Strategic partnerships Community Mobilisation		Partner with Breakthrough to run community mobilization activities around early marriage
7	ASHA	That early marriage is illegal; What they should do in case there is solemnising of EM whom they should reach etc?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Orient, train govt service providers (AWW, ASHA)</li> <li>▪ Disseminate materials</li> <li>▪ Participation in community mobilisation</li> </ul>		AWW and ASHA has a discussion on this and become agents of change by forming a link between community and government services

As far as the communication strategy is concerned, the mediums of communication that were planned by Breakthrough were vetted against the experiences and perceptions expressed by communities and NGOs. These have been listed below.

**Table 11. Community/NGO perception of mediums of communication messaging**

Medium of intervention	Community & NGOs (Ranchi)	Community & NGOs (Hazaribagh)	Community & NGOs (Gaya)
TV	Access to electricity in interior areas is uncertain	Access to electricity in interior areas is uncertain	Repeated ads have not made any difference (People acknowledged watching ads and not acting on them; women have little or no time to watch TV; access to electricity is limited in interiors)
Radio	There have been several ads on the issue of early marriage. The community does not report its influence on them	Radio has dedicated listeners and there is recall value of radio ads but their impact/ influence on them is not there (They can recount ads but there has not been behaviour change attributed to this medium);	People tune in to radio only to listen to film songs; Women have little time or inclination to hear dedicated programmes
Mobile Phones	All blocks visited had connectivity (especially Jitu, a village that had no electricity, all young boys had mobiles)	--	NGOs said this could be a good way to target youth; several youth (mainly boys and married girls had cell phones or access to them)
Internet	Access limited to areas around Ranchi city. Internet access in other areas is limited or absent	Limited or no access	Limited or no access



Video Van Movement	Discussion triggered by video van could influence community as it gave them space to discuss an issue they were given information on		The importance of camps or discussions around video van was seen as a good way to reach out to people
Handouts/ brochures/ posters/publicity tools	Wall paintings, posters were suggested as having made an influence	Reported having seen posters/wall paintings on early marriage	As literacy could be an issue, pictorial messages were suggested
Big events (such as fairs, rallies etc)	Could be a space to discuss ideas with community	These have had an influence on people, especially fairs	Currently day-long camps are held to deal with other concerns such as health, education
Kishori Samooch (adolescent girl groups formed by NGOs))	Is a forum that can be used to tap a peer group to spread a message on early marriage	There have been Kishori Samoochs in communities (eg Hazaribagh Sadar) that discuss issues like personal hygiene among girls. This could be channelised to discuss early marriage issues	Kishori meetings are a good way to reach young boys and girls

In addition to these, other mediums that were suggested include *baithaks* (community discussions), folk theatre and use of unconventional mediums to reaching out to the community such as sports events to target girls and boys, traditional practices such as *gitil oda* (tribal practice of educating young boys and girls on issues related to puberty and growing older, including providing them sex education).

Concerns about handbills or wall paintings not reaching the targeted communities because of literacy barriers or television and radio ads missing some communities because of access of electricity were expressed.

Keeping Breakthrough's goal of facilitating an enabling environment created towards reduction and prevention of early marriage reflected in a change of attitudes among individuals and communities and ensuring the Breakthrough methodology and issues are integrated in the partners' mandate leading to sustained social change and reduction of early marriage, a few strengths and challenges of the suggested recommendations are listed below:

### **Strengths**

Several NGOs as well as communities acknowledged the need for a change in mind-set to bring about change in the incidence of early marriage. NGOs also acknowledged the absence of training/information on modules related to gender and sexuality issues.

1. NGOs expressed willingness to take up these issues and acknowledged the need for such programmes as part of their trainings, community mobilisation initiatives in the broader sphere of work surrounding the empowerment of women. Organisations such as CINI, Srijan and Serve Seva and Sugam Jagriti expressed their interest in being trained in modules of gender and sexuality as a capacity-building exercise as well as part of a larger road map for change
2. Breakthrough had a scope to play a role in political advocacy at the state-level through training modules devised for ASHAs, Anganwadi workers, school management committees, block officers, police officers and others.

### **Challenges**

Looking at changing social norms that existed for centuries through an 18-month project is ambitious. It is necessary to realise this and look for opportunities to ensure the sustainability of the programme beyond the project duration. Some of the challenges of the interventions are listed below:

1. Short project duration. There is the need to build, test and demonstrate this model during this time and see its feasibility and success
2. Need to have a dynamic team at the grassroots level to bring together the NGOs in a non-financial partnership
3. Sustainability beyond the project duration has to be built into the programme component so that it is thought out from the very beginning and an afterthought

## ANNEXURE - I – Intervention Theories

In *Existing Interventions and Intervention Theories*, the effort is to assess existing interventions and identify lacunae and outline the major theories on which various interventions have been/are formulated. *The Many Realities* is an analysis of what seems to be working, where one has to start from scratch and how interventions planned around one sector have to often work on myriad issues rather than one if the evils of child marriage are to be addressed.

### 1. Interventions on Education

*Existing Interventions and Intervention Theories:* Existing interventions on education have focussed more on enrolment of the girl child and on creating awareness about the importance of schooling. Keeping girls in school is a promising though untried strategy to delay the age at marriage.<sup>42</sup>

*The Many Realities:* In the sample area, there existed several schemes and interventions, governmental as well as non-governmental, focusing on creating awareness about the importance of education and more specifically about the Right to Education Act. There was visible change in terms of an increased awareness among girls about various issues, greater knowledge on various subjects and in some cases an ambition to do something worthwhile in life. This had unfortunately not resulted in any significant change in the perceptions of the community towards the girl child and had also not given to girls a bargaining power or a say in matters that affected their lives. Despite the effort of ongoing interventions, the girl child continued to be thought of as an economic burden; education for the girl child was not in itself an attractive proposition; 'too much' education was considered a liability; and the community failed to understand the real significance of education.

The general trend was to get the girl child enrolled in school, and marry her off at the earliest or wait till she passes Class 8 (The Act provides education till Class 8). A respondent pointed out how the school in her village was only till Class 5 so she could study only till Class 5 and was married soon after. Free and compulsory education was available only up to the age of 14 years. The marriageable age had more or less reached the band of 15-17 years in the sample area, with some cases of marriages taking place as young as 12, too. Extending it further (beyond 18 as stipulated in the law on child marriage) requires interventions on education to make post primary levels of education available, accessible and affordable; focus on retaining girls in schools at post primary levels; and simultaneously instilling within the community both the importance of education as well as the ill effects of child marriage.

There was the possibility of using education to create awareness among girls about their rights, practices which curtail their rights, patriarchal practices.

### 2. Interventions on Sexual and Reproductive Health Awareness, particularly Teenage Pregnancies

*Existing Interventions and Intervention Theories:* Interventions on child marriage must first and most forcefully address the sexual and reproductive health risks of child marriage. Considering that awareness within the community on the adverse effects of child marriage on sexual and reproductive health is almost non-existent, interventions have to start from scratch, provide definitive information, enable communities to comprehend and eventually condemn the health impact of child marriage.

*The Many Realities:* Among the consequences of child marriage, the least understood in the sample area was the adverse effect of the practice on sexual and reproductive health. This was ironic given the fact that child marriage was most vociferously denounced from a sexual and reproductive health framework. Communities in the sample area only vaguely

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<sup>42</sup> Knot Ready

understood and almost never condemned the risks associated with teenage pregnancies. Cases of infant and maternal mortality due to early pregnancy were recounted in almost every village that the team visited. The silence that shrouded such incidents was perhaps more worrisome than the incidents themselves.

Interventions must target teenage pregnancies with clear, powerful and where possible visual images. '*Jo khud bachhi hai wo kya bachhi ka khyal rakhegi*'. Young married girls should be specifically targeted, both for creating awareness on teenage pregnancies as well as for disseminating concrete information on related issues like the use of contraceptives and impact of teenage pregnancy both on the infant and the mother.

Interventions must also bring within the ambit of the community's consideration, the other adverse effects of child marriage on sexual and reproductive health - unwanted pregnancies, frequent pregnancies, unsafe abortions, adolescent sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS etc.

### **3. Interventions related to livelihood and economic opportunity for women**

*Existing Interventions and Intervention Theories:* Intervention theories around the world have focused on generating livelihood opportunities for young girls and women. The assumption is that livelihood options and economic opportunities, if available to girls and women, will push back the age at marriage.

*The Many Realities:* Interaction with the community revealed that women by and large stayed away from remunerative work outside the domain of the house; where women had taken to remunerative work, their decision making powers remain stifled; modest but promising changes (increased self worth, better articulation and self assertion) were visible in women who had taken up remunerative work or merely just acquired the skills to take up work;

Interventions therefore must not merely seek to provide livelihood and economic opportunities in the hope of pushing back the marriageable age. They must address the reason why livelihood and economic opportunities do not necessarily translate into a better bargaining power for women; and where it does, why a better bargaining power does not become a voice against child marriage. They must also address ingrained attitudes (like the belief that living off a daughter or wife's income is shameful) which are a hindrance to women's pursuit of livelihood/remunerative work.

### **4. Interventions on sexuality**

*Existing Interventions and Intervention Theories:* Underlying perceptions around sexuality have to be addressed and challenged in order to delay the age of marriage for girls.

*The Many Realities:* An unnerving silence surrounded the subject of sexuality in the sample area. The perceived fear of the family being disgraced by a girl engaging in pre-marital sex, eloping, a girl being sexually assaulted and other such fears revolving around sexuality of the girl was an important justification for child marriage. At the same time these fears also led to staunchly guarded norms regarding intermixing of young boys and girls. In circumstances such as these marriage came as the only acceptable way of exploring sexuality.

Interventions on sexuality must strive to make young girls and boys comfortable with their sexuality, provide them safe spaces for interaction, and reassure parents about the safety of their daughters.

#### **Others**

- The entire sample area was in dire need of interventions on dowry. The practice was the most articulated reason for a girl child being seen as a burden. The survey showed that the amount of money given/taken as dowry increased manifold. In tribal communities, where dowry was not a practice, the custom of giving/taking gifts at the time of the wedding assumed the proportions of a dowry.

- Interventions addressing the problem of eve teasing are also required. The problem assumed grave proportions in the sample area, severely limiting the mobility of girls, becoming a barrier to their schooling and creating a fear among the parents of a girl child.
- There was also a felt need for interventions to generate awareness on laws prohibiting child marriage and address gaps in the implementation of laws related to child marriage.

## ANNEXURE 2 – Ready for Marriage – Child or not a Child

The PCMA (Prohibition of Child Marriage Act) of 2006 defines a “child” as a person who, if a male, has not completed 21 years of age, and if a female, has not completed 18 years of age. It provides punishment for solemnising child marriage, for promoting or permitting child marriage, and for indulging in child marriage.

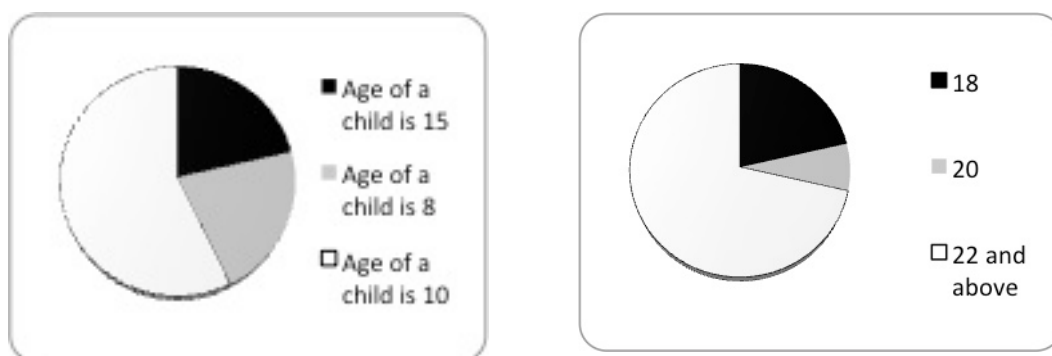
In India the debate over the age at which a person ceases to be a child stems from the fact that different laws prescribe different minimum ages for different kinds of protection offered to a child. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 defines a child as a person who has not completed fourteen years of age. The Factories Act, 1948 and Plantation Labour Act 1951 states that a child is one that has not completed fifteen years of age. For the purpose of free and compulsory education Article 21(a) of the Indian Constitution speaks of children between the ages of six to 14. The Indian Penal Code has its own prescriptions. The Census of India considers a child as a person below 14. While the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as ‘every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier’ it allows for minimum ages to be set by different states under different circumstances.

At a discussion with school-going girls of age 12-17 in Padma’s Kasturba Niketan, the research team explored perceptions of young girls about the age associated with childhood, how to tell if a girl is ready for marriage, and the age at which the girls, given an option, would like to marry. The findings are tabulated below.

**Table 7. Perceptions of girls on issues of childhood, marriage and choice of age at marriage**

S No	Who is a Child?	How do you know somebody is ready for marriage?	When do you want to marry?
1.	Age 1 to 8; one whose laughter is carefree	You know by age and style (Umar aur andaaz se)	20
2.	Age 1 to 10	You know it is time when the girl grows up fast.	22
3	Age 1 to 10	You know automatically.	23
4	Age 1 to 10	You know by looking at the girl.	22
5	Age 1 to 10	You know by looking at the girl.	22
6	Age 1 to 10	You know it is time when the girl grows tall, develops breasts, starts menstruating, and her mind develops faster.	24
7	Age 1 to 10	You know by looking at the girl if she has physically matured.	25
8	Under 10, when a person’s physical development is not complete.	She starts menstruating	25
9	Till age 8	You know from her birth certificate	23
10	Age 1 to 8; one who can laugh without reason; physically and psychologically developed	You know from her birth certificate	25
11	Till age 10	You know from her birth certificate	18
12	Till age 15	You know from her birth certificate	18
13	Till age 15	You know from her birth certificate	26
14	Till age 15	You know from her transfer certificate	18





Among the girls who participated in this discussion, 58% thought of age 10 as the threshold when a girl ceased to be a child and entered into adulthood. An equal proportion of 21.1% thought of age 8 and age 15 as being the threshold. This showed how a child's perception of herself was influenced by social conditioning and the roles and responsibilities assigned to her in familial duties. It also showed the variance it had with legal connotations that failed to permeate the mind-set of society.

A majority of 71% wanted to get married at the age of 22 and above. If this wish was indicative of the wishes of all young girls in all three districts that were surveyed, the PCMA, 2006 probably missed out on an important consideration in prescribing the minimum age to marriage for girls at 18. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, before it was amended in 1978, prescribed the minimum age at marriage for girls at 14. With this Act the legal age at marriage got pushed by two years (it was previously only 12). Between 1929 and 2006 when the PCMA was enacted, the legal age at marriage was pushed back further only by a mere four years. Do we need more progressive amendments? A girl at the age of 18 has just about passed Class 12. Is she really ready for marriage? Has the trajectory of legal reforms on early marriage in India belied the hopes of young girls, whose very interests it is purported to protect?