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Transition to Adulthood: Early Marriage in India
(Extended abstract)

The age at marriage has important implications on a variety of demographic, economic, and social phenomena. In countries with low contraceptive usage and marriages nearly universal, age at marriage has a strong influence on fertility- as early marriages increase the age-specific fertility rate and consequently total fertility rate also increases. Besides fertility, early marriages have deleterious effect on child brides; those marrying earlier face severe psychological distresses, domestic violence, complications in pregnancy and child birth, and have less autonomy. While the importance of age at marriage is well recognized there has been little systematic investigation in documenting the trends in age at marriage, the determinants of early marriage (including social and cultural factors), and the impact that early marriage has on those married at an early age.

In this paper we investigate the impacts of early marriage and its determinants by analyzing data from India where early marriages are still prevalent (nearly half of all marriages occurring before the age 18). The institution of marriage in India is characterized by diverse customs. One distinctive feature of marriage in India is that cohabitation/sexual relationship doesn't start immediately after marriage. Though marriages occur at earlier age cohabitation (or sexual relations) begins only after *gauna* ceremony (typically after puberty). The interval between marriage and *gauna* ceremony are considerably longer in the northern states than in the southern states (where marriages occur at a comparatively later age). This distinction is taken into consideration in all of the analysis presented. Besides regional variation, age of marriage also shows temporal variation. We begin the analysis by documenting the prevalence and trends of early marriage and examine the cohort and period effect.

Next, we examine the determinants of early marriage. Rising age at marriage has often been attributed to modernization (modernization refers to greater industrialization, urbanization, higher education levels, better health and economic conditions). We examine this relationship at the district level using data from Indian census. We analyze whether districts with higher levels of socio-economic development have higher mean age at marriage. There is considerable debate about the

influence of SES on age at marriage. We hypothesize that SES factors (like education and labor force participation) will have a positive effect on age at marriage, as these factors will provide greater autonomy and opportunities for women to postpone marriage. However, the strength of the relationship between SES and age at marriage would be weak mainly because the conditions that favor schooling for girls, employment for women tend also to favor late age of marriage -these conditions include changing norms about women's role and cultural factors. Thus, we expect to find that SES has a weak impact on age of marriage. This analysis would provide evidence, albeit indirectly, that would lend support to the influence of other factors besides socioeconomic in explaining the rising age at marriage.

The deleterious effect of early marriage on fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth is well documented – early marriages increase fertility rates, the chances of complications in pregnancy are higher, and the chances of child survival is lower. However, the impact of early marriage on the early married women's life has not been widely studied. In this paper, we examine the impact of early marriage on certain aspects of early married women's life – like autonomy in decision making, vulnerability to domestic violence, access to knowledge on reproductive and health guidance. For instance, we examine whether early married women suffer greater disadvantages when it comes to autonomy in decision making than those married at later ages?

Data

The study uses data from Census of India conducted in 1991 and 2001, and from National Fertility Health Surveys conducted in 1993(NFHS -1) and 1998(NFHS-2). The census data has information at national, state, district level on variety of factors including proportion currently married by age group, mean age at marriage, literacy levels, women's participation in the labor force and some economic indicators. NFHS were conducted in all the states and the data sets include sample weights at state and national level to make the survey representative at each of this level. NFHS -1 surveyed 88562 and NFHS-2 surveyed 89199 ever-married women. NFHS collected information on age and year of marriage, age of effective marriage (when cohabitation started), indicators of women's autonomy, domestic violence, and measures on reproduction and health care.

Methods

The major aims of this paper are (Aim 1) to chart the trends in early marriage in the last two decades at the national and regional levels to see whether any overall patterns could be discerned and if there

is any temporal variation in age at marriage; (Aim 2) to investigate the determinants of early marriage; (Aim 3) to examine the impact of early marriage on the early married. A variety of methods is employed to analyze these aims. For Aim1, singulate mean age at marriage, proportion never married by age group, and Coale's nuptiality parameters are calculated using the census data. For Aim2, regression models are employed to analyze the major determinants of early marriage. District level mean age at marriage is the dependent variable and set of indicators for socio-economic and cultural condition at the districts are included as the independent variables. For Aim 3, individual level data from NFHS are analyzed using multinomial logit methods to test the impact of early marriage. We estimate separate models to test the impact of early marriage on women's autonomy, domestic violence, and access to reproductive health advice. For example, in the model testing domestic violence, a scale that measures domestic violence (low, medium, or high) will be the dependent variable and age at marriage would be the independent variable; controls will be included for education, place of residence, household economic condition, and religion.

Preliminary results and discussion

Many developing countries including India have passed legislation specifying minimum legal age at marriage (In India, Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1978 sets down the minimum age at marriage for females as 18 years). But such legislation seems to have done little to stop early marriages.

Preliminary analysis indicates that marriage still occurs at early ages, well below the legal minimum. At the regional level, we find that southern states have a slightly higher age at marriage than the northern states. In the northern parts of the country though there has been increases in age at marriage, the age of effective marriage (when cohabitation/sexual relationship starts) does not appear to have increased. This means that in the northern states the time spend between marriage and effective marriage has shortened but effective marriage age is still far lower than that of southern states.

Examination of the role of socio-economic factors on marriage age reveals that the association between SES and age at marriage might be weaker than expected. However, caution must be used in assessing this relationship as available data does not allow specifying the causal pathways precisely. While literacy could have an impact on marriage age, it is not clear whether women with low education have early marriages or is it that those who marry early stop their education earlier to get married. We attempt to tease out these relationships more precisely in our final analysis.