

What Works for Adolescents' Empowerment: Findings from a Learning Review in India

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Abstract

Gender equality is one of 17 Global Goals that make up the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and includes a target on eliminating child, early and forced marriage. India, due to its population burden has the highest number of child brides in the world. In this context, this study (with support from Ford Foundation) was undertaken to review select developmental initiatives across 7 states in India to understand what works to advance the case against child marriage. Marriage and especially child marriage, rooted in a rigid, normative structure, reinforces gender inequality and constitutes gender-based violence at multiple levels and hence, requires layered strategies to be addressed effectively. The review suggests that investing in building adolescent girls' agency, through feminist engagement leading to the creation of an enabling environment for adolescent girls is one of the most successful strategies, irrespective of the context. In addition, building convergence between various state actors such as the police, social welfare functionaries, health, education and judicial officials to create a responsive accountability mechanism is also critical. While the study provides valuable insights into the nuances how the matter of "choice" for young girls is compromised in the context of child marriage, it also aids the bigger picture understanding that legislative and judicial measures alone cannot address the issue that is fundamentally rooted in gender unequal social norms.

Introduction

Although India has one of the fastest growing youth populations in the world, its gender disparities pose significant barriers for the future of girls. Gender-related challenges such as restrictions on mobility, lack of schooling or dropping out of school, early marriage and violence persist in creating unfair disadvantages for girls within this large group of adolescents in India. Son preference and the marginalization of girls are widespread and reflected in wide gender disparities in education and workforce participation. Even though girls' school enrolment has increased in the last three decades, girls' enrolment in higher levels of education is still very low. (Bandyopadhyay M and Subramanian R, 2008, p vii.). This is because increased female enrolment is compromised by persistently high rates of drop out and poor attendance of girls relative to boys. Adolescent girls' programs tend to focus on protecting girls from early and unwanted childbearing, but not on developing economic alternatives that create identities apart from their roles as potential housewives and mothers (Bruce, J and Mensch, BS, 1999) At puberty, girls find themselves increasingly and closely identified by their sexuality. Parental and community fears about girls having pre-marital sexual activity and maintaining sexual chastity of girls results in restrictions around their mobility. A social prominence around proving early fertility forces girls into premature marriage and motherhood—with or without preparation or consent. (Nanda P, Das P, Singh A & Negi R, 2013)

Adolescence is a transitional phase in which many behaviors are acquired, ideas are shaped, and life trajectories are defined. However, this has been overlooked in conventional developmental programming which is focused on "childhood" or on "womanhood". Key constructs including attitudes, behaviors and perceptions related to gender norms, relationships, sexuality, and empowerment get greatly shaped during adolescence. The Global Early Adolescent Study (Kågesten A., et al, 2016), asked young people and their parents about their experiences of growing up as a boy or girl in their communities across 15 countries. Across cultures and countries, gender norms promote sex segregation, conformation to gender roles and responsibilities and gender appropriate behaviors, thus perpetuating gender discrimination and gender-based violence (Blum, RW., Mmari, K., & Moreau, C., 2017, S3)

Evidence suggests that investing in adolescents could reap substantial dividends across generations. A study on global investment in the capabilities of adolescents (Sheehan, P., et al. 2017, p 1803) suggests that,

the triple dividend from adolescent investment could be very large, with effects across health, wellbeing, and the many capabilities essential for both productivity across the life course and for the effective raising of the next generation. Large-scale investments in adolescence should therefore be considered an essential element in life-course and intergenerational strategies for health and wellbeing

It is in this context, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) with support of Ford Foundation has undertaken a review of select developmental initiatives across 10 states in India to understand what works to contribute to the empowerment of adolescents in India. It is also important to note that marriage being an integral part of the established, gender unjust normative structure for women, becomes intrinsic to addressing any other concerns in the lives of young girls and women

The review includes consolidating learnings from strategies utilized by organizations in their work on addressing the issues of adolescents and understanding the contribution of these strategies towards creating an enabling environment focused on addressing child marriage as well as on their holistic development. The larger outcome of the study has been to build evidence in the landscape of empowering adolescent girls to build their rights and agency to challenge social norms and to positively contribute to society and economy. (Eerdewijk et al. 2017, p 13) defines Empowerment of women and girls as expansion of choice and strengthening of voice through transformation of power relations. For the study, the initiatives were reviewed with lens of empowerment and the strategies for engagement were looked at various levels i.e. engagement with adolescents for awareness of their rights and individual agency building; engagement with parents and community members for to create a structure of social support; and engagement with the state actors such as the police, social welfare functionaries, health, education and judicial officials to create a responsive mechanism for these adolescents(Edmeades, J., Hinson, L., Seban, M., & Murithi, L. 2018). It is engagement at multi-stakeholder level that ensures a transformation in power relations, through girls exercising their agency, redistribution of resources and a shift in the institutional structures, which is critical for empowerment (Eerdewijk et al. 2017, p 14).

Method and Materials (200)

This paper is based on the learnings that have emerged from the review of the selected developmental initiatives working on addressing child marriage and supporting the The Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for

Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG), also known as SABLA program in India. The objectives of the review included documenting the processes and learnings from all the projects selected for review, gaining insights into what remains to be done in the context of creating empowering spaces in the lives of adolescent girls (in the context of child marriage/SABLA) and to explore what strategies were employed by organizations to ensure long-term sustainability creation of an enabling ecosystem.

Feminist research principles are embedded in ICRW's work to build evidence that seeks social change and transformation. This study uses a conceptual framework of feminist participatory research methods and draws some methods from implementation research pedagogies.

Methods

A preliminary list of projects was prepared and further substantiated with a secondary review of other prominent programs to be included in the review. 13 projects spread over 10 states of India were selected for the review. Thereafter, each of the projects were contacted for formative conversations so that the proposed research activities are sensitive to the contexts. Primary methods used for data collection were,

- Key informant interviews with leadership of organizations/projects being reviewed, as well as partner organizations and government bodies, if applicable.
- In Depth Interviews with project staff directly involved in project delivery, implementation and monitoring.
- Participatory focus group discussions with project beneficiaries (adolescent girls and boys between 15-18 years of age and men and women, including mothers, fathers and other community members).

Results and Discussion

The term “child marriage,” is commonly used to denote marriages between persons when at least one of the spouses is below the age of 18, a child, as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) however there is emerging concern that it conflates the problem of age and the problem of consent. In general, the child marriage field has emphasized on inappropriately early age at which girls and some boys are marrying, but without highlighting the issue of consent. This is likely because minors, by definition, are unable to give formal consent (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013). For the purposes of this paper, however, we shall be using the term “child marriage” as defined above and commonly understood. Child marriage is recognized as a form of gender-based violence by the United Nations and many governments, and the practice can also perpetuate other forms of gender-based violence. Gender norms that devalue girls and contribute to child marriage also increase the likelihood that child brides will experience violence within those marriages: girls who marry before the age of 18 are more likely to experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse than those who marry later. Married girls may be at risk of violence not only from their husbands, but also their in-laws and other family members. Married girls are often at greater risk of forced sexual initiation and forced marital sex, which can lead to unintended pregnancies, more complicated pregnancies, and greater risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HI (Girls Not Brides, 2016)

The present paper is in the context of developmental programming and learning from the nature and influence of programs in the lives of young girls which focus on, primarily but not limited to, delaying the age of marriage. A broad context of projects covered under the review includes adolescent girls from marginalized communities in varied geographical locations and resource poor settings typically marked by low reach of governance and law enforcement mechanisms, rigid and harmful gender norms. Typically, in these settings, norms governing young girls rest on the fact that as girls enter adolescence, girls’ sexuality is often seen as a vulnerability and an invitation to violence. Parents may feel helpless to protect their daughters and see marriage as a way of securing her safety, ensuring financial security, and in some cases her “sexual purity.”

We will focus on two key learnings that emerged from the review. The first set are in the domain of building adolescent girls’ agency, through feminist engagement leading to the creation of an enabling environment for girls and consequently, influencing the pathways for enhancing their voice, choice and power (Eerdewijk et al. 2017). Another set of learnings suggest that convergence of approaches to create accountability mechanisms in the system to leverage existing platforms and resources is critical for initiatives that aim at building the agency of girls. The discussion will focus on these two major set of learnings from the review.

Agency (Edmeades, J., Hinson, L., Sebany, M., & Murithi, L. 2018) is widely regarded in the literature as reflecting the essence of empowerment itself acting as a key ‘mediator’ between an individual’s desire to bring about change and the achievement of this goal. Broadly, it is the capacity for purposive action that draws on social and material resources at multiple levels to realize preferences and choices, enhance voice, and increase power and influence. Within this, the key three components of agency are choice, voice, and power (Eerdewijk et al., 2017, p 17) where choice refers to the ability of individuals to make and influence decisions that affect their lives. Of particular importance are the ‘first order’ choices that are critical to individuals being able to lead the lives they would like to lead – these include (among others) choices about livelihood; education, mobility; whether, when and who to marry; friends; and whether, when and how many children to have. ‘Voice’ concerns the capacity to actively assert one’s interests, articulate opinions and desires, demand change, and to shape and share in discussions that are relevant to one’s life. This may take place both in private spaces, such as within interpersonal relationships or households. ‘Power’ and its exercise by individuals towards and from others plays a central role in constraining or enabling voice and choice, as both are largely experienced within the context of relationships. In the current research, we found several instances where programs made an effort to upset the existing power structures which have influenced the components of voice and choice in the lives of young girls to varying degrees. Foremost in these set of strategies is engaging with young girls using group education activities on developing gender perspectives through gender, sexuality and rights curricula designed with a comprehensive sexuality education (UNFPA, 2016) framework and sports-based activities (Gaynair, 2012) This is closely tied to building gender integrated life skills and providing sexual, reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education in certain cases. The curricula typically focus on building knowledge around, self, concepts of power and patriarchy, body

and sexual and reproductive rights to name a few. The sessions are transacted over a period using participatory approaches which are contextualized to enable translation of key messages in a manner that adolescent girls find easy to understand and relate to their lived realities. In addition, investments have demonstrated success in building peer leadership models that have a significant relationship with building collective agency of the girls. Collectivization as an approach is an inherent component of many of the programs focusing on delaying the age of marriage for adolescent girls in India.

Engaging with male peers and key decision makers in the ecosystem of adolescent girls has also emerged important in this program strategy. The need to involve men in achieving gender equality has been recognized and highlighted by a range of civil society organizations, including the United Nations (UNESCAP, Elimination of Violence against Women in Partnership with Men, 2003, p 1). It is now well understood that norms attached with harmful masculinities interact with structural influences of economic inequality, globalization and different forms of conservatism to create conditions for various forms of gender-based violence to occur, which are then in turn reinforced by families, communities and other political and economic institutions. With respect to the current study, this directly feeds into the aspect of creating positive role models for both, girls and boys on concerned issues of gender equitable attitudes and behaviors that have an implicit and explicit impact on the perpetuation of institutions such as marriage. Understanding and addressing this complex relationship, programs have made efforts to engage with boys and men in various ways. These include working with boys who are peer influencers in the girls lives, such as brothers and schoolmates, with older male influencers in the girls lives, such as male teachers and fathers and with older male influencers in the girls communities, such as religious or local governance leaders of the villages. In these various approaches, programs have demonstrated variation in being able successfully engage certain ideas of masculinity for these men. For instance, a father could be engaged in the program as a key decision maker in his daughter's life, but the same person may also be a community leader and feel responsible for decisions taken at the larger platform which may affect several girls.

Continuing to our second set of learnings on convergence of approaches to create accountability mechanisms in the system to leverage existing platforms and resources for building the agency of girls, we view resources (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005, p. 8) not as key components of empowerment itself, but rather as 'enabling factors' that may act as catalysts for empowerment within the context of specific relationships. Furthermore, different sets of resources as being relevant at different societal levels, reflecting the multilevel nature of the empowerment process. These levels may be the individual, the immediate relational (including relationships with sexual/romantic partners, family members, peers and other groups the individual is in regular and direct contact with), and the distant relational (e.g. relationships with broader contextual actors, such as social institutions and structures). In this light, two important insights emerge from this review. First is the creation of safe and inclusive spaces for adolescent girls. For girls to be able to internalize that they have agency; make decisions to express their voice and make choices directly influencing their life, access to and utilization of spaces is critical. These spaces could be physical or abstract (existing in relation to the presence or absence of some people). These spaces are marked by a sense of collective strength and privacy at the same time, freedom from prejudice, confidentiality and trust among the members. Second is creating accountability mechanisms using convergence approaches to facilitate positive sanction from the structural actors by engaging with larger structural aspects of the girls lives, such as prevalent social norms, laws, policies, government platforms and so on, not only are the relevant resources available within these structures accessed and leveraged, but they are also made accountable to fulfil their duties and mandates relevant to the wellbeing of the adolescent girls. In the process, contextual barriers are addressed to some extent by garnering a "positive sanction" from these system level actors to enable girls to build their agency in the matters of their own lives and the lives of other peers around them.

For example, activating Village Level Child Protection Committees (VLCPC) to provide a public platform to adolescent leaders to discuss their concerns, leverage support for project supported campaigns that address their needs. The Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) of the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) in India, launched in 2009 aims at establishing and strengthening a comprehensive child protection system at state, district, and community level, and provides a range of child protection services to children. Since the launch of ICPS, a more structured attempt is being made to integrate this community-led action within the scheme in the form of village, panchayat and block level child protection committees (CPC). In this context, the VLCPCs form a core

unit of the child protection mechanism in India which is now moving towards a primary prevention approach to the issue with active support from civil society organizations. The focus on primary prevention means increased efforts to empower and enable children, families, and communities to take charge of protection of children from violence, exploitation and abuse. Going back to the program strategies used by organizations to leverage existing resources, platforms and structures, a number of instances during the review pointed towards the fact that organizations have invested in “activating” the VLCPCs by creating the committees, undertaking due processes to establish rules of operation and making sure that young people have adequate representation in these committees, as mandated. This has worked very well in the case of a few organizations which have established buy-in from the communities, to address issues of girls dropping out of school for marriage. Since VLCPC meetings happen in a community owned space, often in the village school premises or community halls of the local self-government, with the involvement of frontline health and nutrition workers, young leaders associated with the projects and as part of the VLCPC get a voice to share their concerns and discuss potential solutions with key decision makers at the village level. The setting also provides a state backed legitimacy to these conversations which enable developing collective solutions with all possible resources. Most importantly, it enables girls and boys to actively engage with primary actors from the local state departments such as police, education, local activists, advocates, welfare officers etc. if need be.

The real or perceived threat of violence for women’s and girls constricts their ability to move around community in order to keep them “safe.” While such concerns are established determinants of girls discontinuing their school education and diminishing their opportunities to work, such concerns significantly influence girls mobility on a daily basis, within their village spaces. This lack of mobility also affects their participation in civic engagement that undercut efforts to empower women and girls. In this context, programs have invested in activating and using government and community spaces such as AWCs, ARCs, community halls, schools et al to hold jointly led activities also build the idea of these spaces being community owned and safe for adolescent girls, which is very important in settings where adolescent girls’ mobility and visibility in public spaces is restrained because of fear of safety.

Conclusion

While there is a growing body of information available about child marriage globally, relatively little comparative work has been done to examine its different manifestations, experiences and impacts in different settings. The review aimed to address this shortcoming by demonstrating, both the heterogeneity of the issue of early marriage in different settings as well as the related concerns that cut across contexts. The analysis hopes that the contribution will be in the consolidation of a diverse body of programming experiences and the development of a holistic conceptual framework for understanding the practice, its antecedents and consequences particularly for empowering adolescents in the truest sense, where their voices and choices find an enabling environment to be heard and asserted as and when they decide to. Our research is pointing to new data on a deeper understanding of the interlinkages between lack of sexual autonomy and norms around gender-based violence as important influencers on the continuation of practices and customs on child marriage as well as various other barriers to adolescent girls’ empowerment. This is especially true in the case of India, where marriage is imminent and sexuality and violence remain stigmatized, these remain shrouded in silence. As young women’s bodies become sites of contestation between various forces in the social, economic and political domains, expression of choice for girls and making their voices heard becomes increasingly difficult in context of institutionalized norms such as “marriage”.

Endnotes

- ⁱ The finalized study protocol was submitted to ICRW's Internal Review Board for ethical approval.
- ⁱⁱ Using the entry point of better health outcomes and delaying the age of school dropout have helped creating greater community buy in both for programs as well as for girls to negotiate within their families.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Village Level Child Protection Committees setup under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) of the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), Government of India (GoI), to address child protection concerns and to take steps to address and prevent them.

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