




Breakthrough  
Formative Research

**Marriage Can Wait.**  
**Our Rights Can't.**



# The causes, consequences, and resistance of early marriage in Bihar and Jharkhand

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## Executive Summary

Breakthrough is a global human rights organization seeking to make violence and discrimination against women and girls unacceptable. Working out of centers in India and the U.S., we use the power of arts, media, pop culture, and community mobilization to inspire people to take bold action to build a world in which all people live up to their full potential.

One of Breakthrough's current initiatives is to end early marriage in India. We commissioned the formative research in this study in order to fully understand the underlying context of and inform our programs on this issue. We are sharing our findings to help advance the broader field and support our partners working on similar issues in India and around the world.

We hope our research will provide helpful information for other organizations and entities who share the goal of challenging early marriage, and will offer current and complex insight into this urgent global crisis of human rights.

### Early marriage defined

Early marriage occurs when girls or boys — mostly girls — enter marriage before they are fully adult. While the definition of “adult” varies according to different laws and customs, we define early marriage as marriage before a girl is legally, physically, or emotionally a woman.

Early marriage occurs across the world, especially in South Asia, where, according to the World Health Organization, nearly half of young women are married before their 18th birthday. Worldwide, 36 percent of women aged 20–24 were married before age 18, 1 in 9 before age 15.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, if current trends continue, 142 million girls will be married by age 18 — which

means 14.2 million girls married every year, or 37,000 girls married every day.<sup>2</sup>

The practice of early marriage persists even where it is illegal, and in spite of international and regional conventions and government and NGO interventions. In fact, it is the norm in many regions worldwide, even as it does serious damage to girls' physical and mental health and fundamental opportunities, rights, and freedoms. Early marriage leads to domestic and sexual violence, reproductive health complications, physical and emotional trauma, HIV/AIDS and other STDs — and, in far too many cases, death.

The practice of early marriage arises from and perpetuates deeply engrained beliefs and norms about the inferior status of girls and role of women. Adolescent girls usually have no say in whom or when to marry, whether or not to have sexual relations, and when to bear children.

Early marriage is harmful to all involved, especially young women and girls. It both represents and perpetuates a culture that devalues them. It exacts a steep price from families, communities, and societies in terms of lost human potential. Early marriage means a very early start to a series of human rights violations and deprivations that affect girls and women throughout their lives.

<sup>1</sup> (36 percent figure does not include China.) United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



Addressing the problem of early marriage offers an opportunity to begin breaking this cycle. Doing so requires a clear understanding of the culture in which the practice persists. To that end, this research takes a close look at two areas of India where early marriage rates are particularly high. From these observations, we can draw conclusions and make recommendations about what interventions will be effective in challenging the practice of early marriage.

**Key recommendations:**

- Focus on men and boys as stakeholders and leaders of change. Fathers and male elders make most of the decisions around early marriage. And the negative impact of early marriage, while felt most directly and acutely by girls and women, ripples through families, communities, and beyond. We must train men, and especially young men, to act as leaders in challenging early marriage — not just “on behalf of women,” but for change that will support human rights and well-being for all.
- Focus on gender and sexuality. Interventions must include but go beyond increasing girls’ access to schools and skills. They must position girls and young women as full human beings with intrinsic value and inalienable human rights. An approach that includes and addresses gender and sexuality stands to challenge norms, break taboos, and pinpoint the deepest roots of this practice, creating an environment for deep, sustainable change.

Why do we call it “early marriage?” We use the term “child marriage” when referring to a legal document or definition using the term. Otherwise, the term “early marriage” helps address several concerns. These include:

- Legal definitions of the term child vary. Variants in India include: 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).
- Some communities are less resistant to interventions on “early marriage” than on “child marriage,” which they are already aware is illegal.
- The concept of age may be fluid in the communities in question, with registration of birth a relatively recent phenomenon. Age in itself is seen as correlated to physical maturity and not to a legally sanctified entity.
- The age groups affected by early marriage are not homogenous. Not everyone below 18 has the same needs. A 17-year-old is very different from a 9-year-old. Calling the practice “early marriage” helps us expand our view of the young people it affects — and explore solutions that are appropriate to their age group.
- Breakthrough addresses early marriage through the lens of sexuality and sexual rights. That means acknowledging and addressing the issues of sexuality that drive early marriage: the stigma

against young women expressing their sexuality and mingling with young men outside family and societal view and constraint; the (misguided) notion that marriage will help shield young women from sexual harassment and assault. Calling the practice “early marriage” expands our capacity to characterize and address those it affects as young people (not just “children”) with sexuality, sexual agency, sexual expression, and sexual rights.

- Also see Appendix 2.

### **Early marriage in India**

According to the World Health Organization, in 47 percent of all marriages in India the bride is under 18; 18 percent are married by age 15. Among the countries with the highest prevalence (percentage) of early marriage, India is 12th.<sup>3</sup>

Early marriage in India is a centuries-old practice. It has also been illegal in India for nearly a century. While the age at first marriage has shown a marginal increase, the last National Family Health Survey (2005-06) showed a prevalence of 60 percent. Age-old customs and traditions, patriarchal views of the girls as burdens, and the economic insecurities associated with having an unmarried girl at home continue to ensure that social sanction has a greater influence on communities than a 100-year-old law.

### **The focus of this research**

UNICEF figures show that Bihar and Jharkhand are among the states with the highest prevalence of early marriage. Bihar has the highest rate of all, with more than 60 percent of girls married before age 18. In Jharkhand, more than 55 percent of girls are married before 18.

These areas present an opportunity for intervention that is both urgent and challenging. Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices conducted formative research in a few locations in Gaya district in Bihar, and

Ranchi and Hazaribagh districts in Jharkhand. The team used participatory methods to:

- Understand the causes and effects of early marriage from the perspective of the communities involved.
- Shed light on the subject in a specific geographic area.
- Analyse the findings.
- Use this analysis to pinpoint effective interventions by Breakthrough and other organizations.

The research team collected detailed case stories. Discussions with the community revealed complex links among tradition, poverty, dowry practices, lack of opportunities for education, concern for girls’ safety, resistance to inter-caste alliances, and the practice of early marriage. Even as the practice persisted, there was some acknowledgement of the impact of the practice on the health of a young girl, her loss of educational and other opportunities, and her diminished status in the marital relationship and the marital family.

### **The data confirmed several basic realities:**

- Families are often motivated by the belief that early marriage will protect girls’ safety and security. (Across India, there is fear, and significant risk, of sexual harassment and assault. However, early marriage simply exposes girls to another set of related dangers.)
- Households and communities are stigmatised for unmarried girls (and sometimes boys).
- Girls and young women (and, to some degree, boys and young men) lack decision-making power.
- There is a strong perception of girls as “bad investments.”

### **The data also revealed some compelling details and nuances:**

- Young people are more inclined than their elders to question the practice of early marriage. Clearly this is an important demographic for advocates to focus on, as

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.





young people can lead change for the next generation.

- Providing girls with education and marketable skills does not automatically protect them from early marriage. In some cases, skills and education make them more “marriageable.” The relationship of education, skills, and economics to early marriage is complex.
- Girls view most men they know as potential threats or harassers. (At one school, 90 percent of girls said they viewed men they knew as potential molesters.) The taboo against intermingling of the sexes outside marriage leaves no place for girls and boys to explore healthy sexuality or to develop mutual respect, communication, and understanding. Consent issues, harassment, and other problems are thus even more likely to arise. This in turn fuels stricter controls — including early marriage — and perpetuates a vicious cycle.

From this research, several entry points for program development emerged:

- Education
- Teen pregnancy
- Livelihoods
- Sexual and reproductive health
- Sexual harassment
- Girls’ sexuality and societal control of it
- Gender rights

By addressing these topics, new and emerging community leaders have the potential to spark a shift in the perception of girls as liabilities. Men and boys especially must be considered and cultivated as agents of this change — not only in the context of early marriage, but also as champions of women’s rights as human rights essential to the well-being of all. That shift — wherein girls and women are equally valued members of families and societies — will create the cultural conditions for the end of early marriage.