

# Gender **Talk**



Welcome to the third issue of GenderTalk from the NCAER-National Data Innovation Centre's Gender Hub. In this issue of GenderTalk, we discuss about women's agency in marriage choice. We bring you articles by researchers that highlight some of the issues, followed by conversation with a practitioner.

Photo: Alamy

GenderTalk is a space where scholars, policymakers, and civil society members can engage with each other on a theme vital to women's well-being in India. In this edition, we bring you the following:

1. **How much agency do Indian women have in marriage choices?** by Bipasa Banerjee (NCAER)
2. **Freedom to Choose? Single Women and Reasons for Evading Marriage** by Sarah Lamb (Brandeis University)
3. **Marriage, Motherhood and Agency: Adolescent Girls' Experiences in India**
4. **Indian Matchmaking: Are working women penalized in the marriage market?** by KG Santhya (Independent Researcher) and AJ Francis Xavier (Population Council)
5. **The Emergence of Educational Hypogamy in India** by Diva Dhar (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation & Oxford Martin School)
6. **Conversation** with Poonam Muttreja (Population Foundation of India) on initiatives towards empowering girls and women.



## 1. How much agency do Indian women have in marriage choices?

Bipasa Banerjee (NCAER)

**I**s a wave of globalization, accompanied by increasing education and access to the internet, transforming India's marriage system? Jayakody et. al., (2008) has shown that the growing influence of

ideation and normative forces such as an increase in emphasis on individual prerogative, freedom, and equality is visible in decisions of marriage, fertility, and family structure. Advocates of the modernization

**Figure 1: Length of Acquaintance Before Marriage**

Share of women (%)



Source: IHDS 2011-12

perspective would argue that the family-centric mode of arranging marriages is giving way to increased choice. Growth in websites like Tinder and increased media coverage of love marriages lends support to this expectation. But how widespread are these practices?

Data on marriage choices seem to indicate that arranged marriage remains the predominant mode by which partners are chosen in the Indian context. A substantial portion of marriages continue to be parent-arranged with very few marriages being self-choice which are colloquially also known as ‘love marriages’ (Banerji & Deshpande, 2021). Data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) of 2011-12 show, that only about 5% of women report that they chose their spouses without any input from their families. Self-choice marriages are more common in North-East India (34%) followed by South India (slightly less than 10%) but are hardly seen in North India.

Nonetheless, with rising education, women have gained a little more say in who they marry. Even when marriages are arranged by the family, the bride’s opinions are considered in a substantial minority of the cases,

particularly when they have a college education. While 95% of the women noted that their families were involved in selecting their husbands, 55% also said that they had some input in this decision. Among women with a college education, 77% had some input. But what does this input mean? IHDS 2011-12 shows that nearly 65% of women only met their husbands at or around marriage (see Figure 1). Data shows the percentage of women who have known their husbands before marriage for a longer period of time is merely 11% with 6% knowing him since childhood and 5% knowing him for more than a year. Whereas 9% and 15% of women had been acquainted with their husbands for less than a year and less than a month respectively. So how did they provide input?

Among women, the more educated they are, the greater their participation in the selection of husbands (see Figure 2). Data shows that 9% of women with college degrees select their husbands on their own whereas only 3% of women with no education do the same. In terms of parent-arranged marriages with the participation of the bride, the numbers are 77% for women with college degrees and 41% for women with no educational qualification.

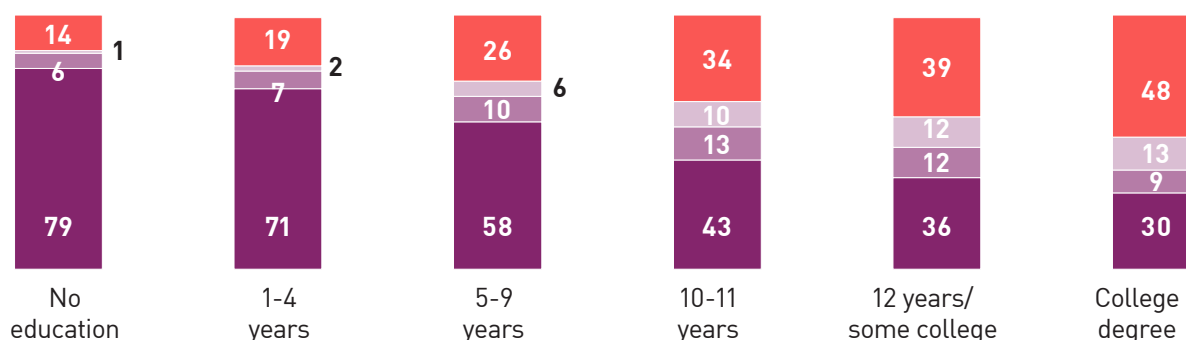
The IHDS 2011-12 data show that for more educated women there is a higher chance of having some form of contact with their husbands before marriage. The highest percentage of women (79%) who did not have any form of contact with their husbands were the ones with no education whereas

**Arranged marriages continue to thrive but educated women have a greater say in who they marry.**

**Figure 2: Pre-marriage contact with husband increases with education**

Pre-marriage contact with husband (Share of women, %)

No contact Only saw photograph Phone/email exchange Met



Source: IHDS 2011-12

the lowest percentage (30%) was observed in the case of women with college degrees. In a similar context, 48% of women with college degrees met their husbands prior to marriage whereas it's only 14% for women with no education.

Women who have a choice in partner selection are often more empowered in household decision-making after marriage whereas women who have a lower level of participation in spouse selection exhibit less autonomy in household decisions after marriage (Banerji & Deshpande, 2021). Hence, despite diverseness in the categories of marriage, marriage continues to remain a family affair where the woman still struggles to have a say in the events transpiring in marriage as well as in the post-marriage scenario.

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## 2. Freedom to Choose? Single Women and Reasons for Evading Marriage

By Dr. Sarah Lamb (Brandeis University)

If one takes a quick glance at public media, opting out of marriage seems suddenly possible for women in India (Bumble 2023; Pandey, 2022; Sinha, 2019). At the same time, it is difficult to convey just how prevalent and taken-for-granted are perceptions that it is normal and right to marry.

To understand the rising trend of single living, I set out to listen to the stories of never-married Bengali women across social classes and rural-urban contexts, in both Kolkata and surrounding towns and villages (Lamb 2022). One question I wished to probe concerned women's agency in marital decisions: to what extent can we understand the rising trend of women's singlehood as a matter of choice?

**Singlehood  
by choice or  
circumstance?**

Through my research exploring the lives of 54 never-married women, ranging from age 35 to 92, I found that primarily only the most privileged, city-educated, and cosmopolitan elites are the ones who can embrace single lifestyles by choice. Even then, many battle to make their singlehood accepted in their families and wider society. Especially for those who walk on paths less traveled, making choices is often challenging, complicated, and painful.

Table 1 conveys in plain strokes my interpretation of the reasons for not marrying conveyed by the study's 54 women. A strong majority, 70 percent, did not see themselves as having actively chosen to not marry. Rather, evading marriage was often a consequence of other pressing life priorities—ranging from needing to support one's natal kin through household labor and earning, to identifying as a lesbian in a context where same-sex marriage is not legal, to being regarded as too dark-skinned or disabled or otherwise bearing a stigmatized embodiment, to being too educated or high-achieving to find a suitable match. (As one participant put it: "The groom should be superior to the bride in all ways—in all ways, except looks.")

Many others, however, did see themselves as having chosen to evade marriage, at least an important part. The stories of these women—about 30 percent of my sample—revealed trends making it increasingly possible for women to pursue lives beyond marriage in India. Educational and employment opportunities are expanding, allowing more girls and women to support themselves and find value in life without marrying. Nonfamily housing arrangements in India's metros are also on the rise, including single-person flats, working women's hostels, and old age homes—novel developments in a society where nonfamily housing arrangements are scarce and strong stigma is still often

**Table 1: Reasons for not marrying**

Reason for not marrying	Participants (out of 54)
Purposefully chose not to	<b>16 (~30%)</b>
Conveying a feminist sensibility: perceiving marriage at odds with gender equality	<b>15</b>
Parents/kin failed to arrange marriage	<b>13</b>
Engrossed in education and/or work	<b>13</b>
Natal kin needed income	<b>10</b>
Stigmatized embodiment (regarded as disabled, ill, infertile, too dark-skinned, and/or unattractive)	<b>9</b>
Too educated and/or high-achieving to find a suitable match	<b>6</b>
Could not (yet) find the right man	<b>5</b>
Uncomfortable with arranged marriage process but no real access to finding own partner	<b>5</b>
Preference for natal kin	<b>4</b>
Identifies as lesbian	<b>4</b>
Expresses some gender dysphoria	<b>4</b>
Disgusted by or uncomfortable with sex and/or men	<b>2</b>
"No one liked me"	<b>1</b>
Tarnished public sexual reputation	<b>1</b>
Pursuing a spiritual life instead	<b>1</b>

Source: Reasons for Not Marrying (reprinted from *Being Single in India*, Lamb 2022, p. 26).  
Note: Most participants conveyed two or more reasons, so the figures add up to more than 54.

applied to the unattached woman living alone. Further, India is witnessing expanding paradigms for sexual and loving relationships beyond conventional marriage, most pronouncedly among the cosmopolitan elite, involving what many perceive to be “modern” ideals of sexual freedom and agency, and increased recognition of feminist and LGBTQ+ rights.

No one story is typical, as single women lead highly varied lives situated by social class, rural-urban contexts, family-kinship situations, sexuality, life experiences, and personal aspirations. I close with one portrait to illuminate the intersecting aspirations, obstacles, and opportunities at play in single women’s lives, revealing how the ideal of choice is rarely as straightforward as we might wish.

Medha Manna was born into an impoverished family in a remote village. The family often went hungry. Her mother sold vegetables on the footpath. Yet Medha possessed a keen drive for education and seeing the world. She was the first girl in her village ever to complete secondary school, and she became a professor of Bengali in a provincial city.

Busy pursuing an education and career, Medha eventually passed the age of 28, then 30, then 35, by which most Indian women marry. Along the way, her natal kin had also failed to work hard to arrange her marriage, partly because they were enjoying access to her generous salary. When younger, Medha herself had also resisted marriage, coming to see herself as a feminist and adamant that girls and women should not view marriage as every woman’s ultimate goal.

Yet eventually, when Medha decided she might like to marry, she came to realize that her social class limbo made it nearly impossible to find a suitable match. As Medha put it: “I’m a professor now with a good salary—but I don’t belong to that kind of family that another professor [from an educated family background] could marry me. I also can’t marry a village boy from an uneducated family.”

Now at age 60, Medha has cultivated a vibrant circle of friends and has enjoyed decorating her solo home with vibrant colors and plants. Life as a single woman has often been difficult, though. Medha remarked, “I have to fight with hostility in every step of my life as a single woman due to my not being an ordinary person.”

Medha and other women’s stories reveal both the challenges faced by women living outside the powerful norms of marriage, as well as the expanding possibilities for women to use their agency to imagine and pursue alternative worlds.

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### 3. Marriage, Motherhood and Agency: Adolescent Girls’ Experiences in India

By KG Santhya (Independent Researcher) and AJ Francis Xavier (Population Council)

Agency—the ability to act on one’s behalf, pursue one’s goals and exercise influence and voice—has become prominent in theories of change for empowering girls and improving their health, education, and economic outcomes (Eerdewijk et al., 2017; Kabeer 1999). Theories and frameworks have noted that the agency is dynamic and multi-dimensional, and typically includes varying combinations of constructs such as decision-making, goal setting, voice, negotiation, self-efficacy, mobility, leadership, participation, or collective action (Edmeades 2018; Eerdewijk et al., 2017; Jejeebhoy et al., 2010; Kabeer 1999). While cognitive development and opportunities for higher education and employment can result in an expansion of agency in adolescence for some, intensification of harmful gender norms and changes in social roles triggered by the onset of puberty may lead to loss of agency for some others (McCarthy et al., 2021). However, few published studies have mapped how agency changes over the course of adolescence among young people in developing countries. One study that has explored this question with longitudinal data from Zambian adolescent girls found that membership in high agency groups declined among older girls over time

and that exposure to events such as early marriage was associated with loss of agency (McCarthy et al., 2021).

In this brief, we use data from a unique longitudinal study of adolescents in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh conducted by the Population Council in 2015–16 (wave 1) and 2018–19 (wave 2), “Understanding the lives of adolescent and young adults study (UDAYA study)”,<sup>1</sup> to explore changes in unmarried girls’ agency over time and with the transition to marriage and motherhood. We calculated agency indicators using factor analysis of unmarried girls’ survey responses to a series of questions related to their agency. The factor analysis yielded four different dimensions of agency which we named: 1) index of financial agency,<sup>2</sup> 2) index of decision-making agency,<sup>3</sup> 3) index of freedom of movement,<sup>4</sup> and 4) index of egalitarian gender role attitudes.<sup>5</sup>

#### Girls’ agency over time

Agency was limited among all girls at wave 1 (Figure 1). Of the four dimensions of agency, girls scored the lowest on financial agency (mean score of 43 on a scale of 0–100) and the highest on adherence to egalitarian gender role

1. The first wave of UDAYA study was conducted in 2015–2016, and the follow up survey was conducted three years later in 2018–2019. The 2015–16 survey was conducted among a state-representative sample of unmarried boys and girls aged 10–19 and married girls aged 15–19. In 2018–19, those who were successfully interviewed in 2015–16, and who consented were re-interviewed. Of the 20,594 who were eligible for re-interview, 4,567 boys and 12,251 girls were re-interviewed.

2. Respondents owned an account in a bank or post office and operated it themselves.

3. Respondents participated in decisions related to level of schooling that they should have, major household purchases and whether or not to engage in work.

4. Respondents were allowed to visit a shop/market/home of a friend or relative within their own village, a shop/market/home of a friend or relative outside their own village and a community programme such as a mela, sports event, adolescent group meeting.

5. Respondents perceived that girls’ friendship with boys was not wrong, husband and wife should share childcare, girls should have a right to decide when they want to marry and husband should not solely decide how to spend household money.

**Figure 1: Adolescent girls' agency, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, 2015-16 and 2018-19**



Note: Data presented relate to 6,168 girls who were unmarried and aged 15-19 in 2015-16 and re-interviewed in 2018-19  
Significance level: \*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.1

attitudes (mean score of 66 on a scale of 0-100). All dimensions of agency, except decision-making agency, improved over time, confirming that age does indeed confer agency on adolescents. The mean score increased from 43 to 55 on the index of financial agency, from 45 to 50 on the index of freedom of movement, and from 66 to 73 on the index of egalitarian gender role attitudes. However, the mean score remained unchanged for the index of decision-making agency at 51 at both the waves.

### Shifts in girls' agency with the transition to marriage and motherhood

Of the 6,168 girls who were unmarried at the time of the 2015-16 survey, 26 percent of girls got married and the remaining girls remained unmarried during the inter-survey period. Some 12 percent of all girls (and 47 percent of girls who got married in the inter-survey period) had begun childbearing by the time of the 2018-19 survey.

Life events such as marriage and motherhood affected adolescent girls' agency in varied ways (Figure 2). Most dimensions of agency, except decision-making agency, improved over time among girls who remained unmarried during the inter-survey period, with girls gaining most on freedom of movement (mean score increased from 46 to 58), followed by financial agency (mean score increased from 45 to 55). Moreover, gender role attitudes became more egalitarian over time among these girls (mean score increased from 67 to 75).

Shifts in agency were mixed among girls who got married during the inter-survey period, regardless of whether they became a mother or not. As in the case of girls who remained unmarried, financial agency improved among girls who got married. But the gain in financial agency

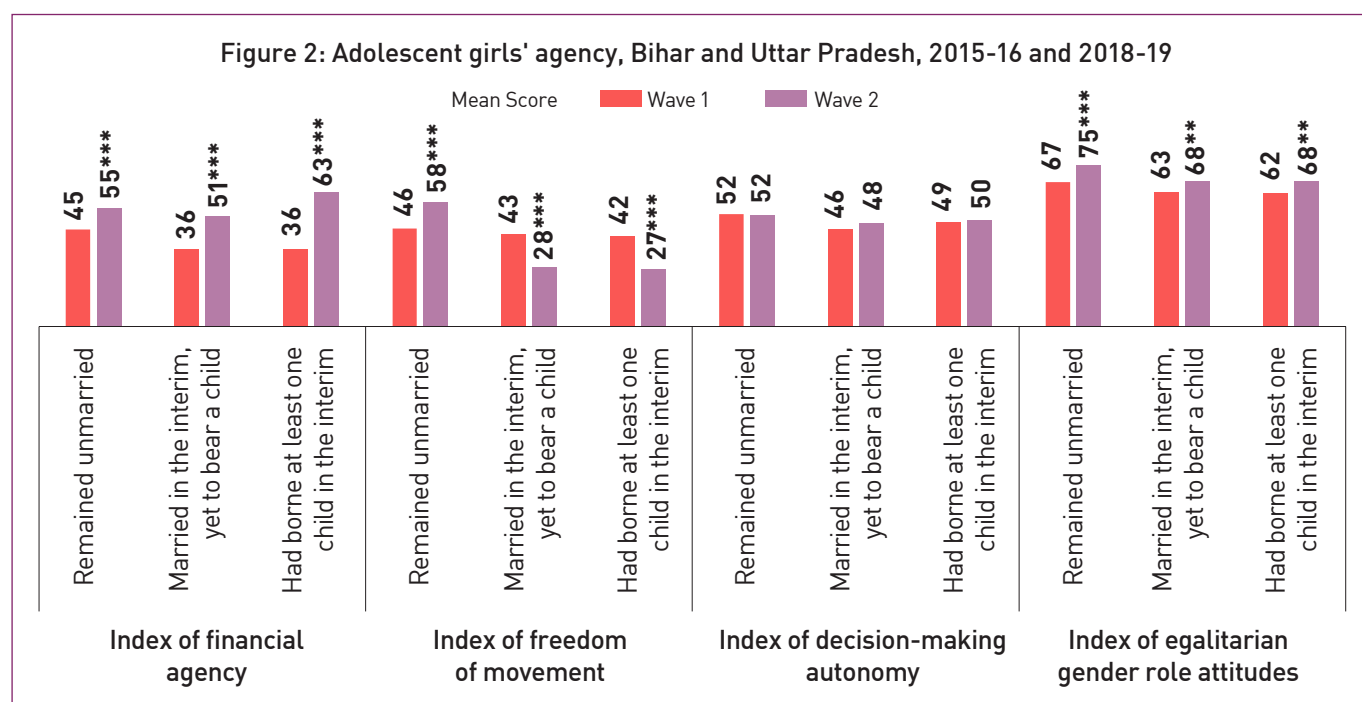
was larger among those who got married than those who remained unmarried, and even larger among girls who had begun childbearing during the inter-survey period (the mean score increased from 36 to 51 among girls who got married, but had not begun childbearing, and from 36 to 63 among girls who had begun childbearing). This positive association was confirmed in multi-variate regression analysis too.

Adherence to egalitarian gender role attitudes increased among girls who got married, as with girls who remained unmarried, although the increase was slightly smaller among the former than the latter (increase in mean score from 62-63 to 68 among girls who got married vs. from 67 to 75 among girls who remained unmarried).

**Delayed marriage is associated with an increase in egalitarian gender role attitudes for young women.**

Girls' freedom of movement, on the other hand, declined significantly with marriage. The mean score on the index of freedom of movement declined from 42-43 to 27-28 among girls who got married during the inter-survey period, while it increased from 46 to 58 among girls who remained unmarried. This negative association was confirmed in multi-variate regression analysis too. This finding suggests that marriage may mark increased social isolation of adolescent girls.

Finally, as in the case of girls who remained unmarried, there was no change in the decision-making agency among girls who got married in the interim.



Note: Data presented relate to 6,168 girls who were unmarried and aged 15-19 in 2015-16 and re-interviewed in 2018-19; wave 1 scores reflect agency scores in unmarried status for all girls  
Significance level: \*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.1

In brief, findings highlight that life events such as marriage and motherhood in adolescence do influence girls' agency, although not consistently across different dimensions of agency. The reduction in girls' freedom of movement with marriage and motherhood in adolescence can limit their social networks and opportunities to gain knowledge and skills to improve their health, education, and economic outcomes. Successful intervention strategies to empower adolescent girls need to directly address this negative influence, while augmenting the positive influence on their financial agency. Our analysis calls for future research attention to explore the determinants of observed changes, both improvements, and deterioration, in adolescent girls' agency with marriage and motherhood in adolescence.

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## 4. Indian Matchmaking: Are working women penalized in the marriage market?

By Diva Dhar (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation & Oxford Martin School)

One of the great puzzles of the Indian economy centers on low female labor force participation. India has one of the lowest rates globally, despite increasing female education, improved water, roads and electrification, and dropping fertility rates (Desai et al, 2018). There are likely many interlinked factors, but one issue that has been less delved into is gender norms related to women's work and marriage. We know from survey data that nearly half of the Indian adults think married women whose husbands earn well should not work outside the home (Coffey et al, 2018), as reflected in popular Indian shows such as Indian Matchmaking.

How do these attitudes play out in the marriage market? How do working women or higher-earning women fare when they enter the marriage market? To understand women's experience in the marriage market for women, I conducted the first experimental study on a popular marriage website in India

Using a correspondence experiment design on Shaadi.com, I fabricated marital profiles for women from different castes/sub-castes, modeled on real profiles from users. These profiles did not have photos and were identical on all accounts such as age, height, education, and lifestyle except for their statements about work and income. I also identified a random sample of 2750 active male suitors, meeting certain eligibility criteria including income (\$6k-\$10k) in/around Delhi. Finally, I randomized these male users to receive expressions of interest from one of the fabricated profiles from the same caste/sub-caste from the following categories:

**Control:** Never worked (NW): Not working women who

do not intend to work after marriage

**Treatment 1:** High income, working women pre-marriage, and post-marriage (HIW+) – Women working at Rs 7-10 lakhs income category, with a stated preference for continuing work after marriage

**Treatment 2:** Low income, working women pre and post-marriage (LIW+) – Women working at Rs 2-4 lakhs income category, with a stated preference for continuing work after marriage

**Treatment 3:** High income, working women pre-marriage only (HIW) – Women working at Rs 7-10 lakhs income category, with a stated preference for giving up work after marriage

**Treatment 4:** Low income, working woman pre-marriage only (LIW) – Women working at Rs 2-4 lakhs income category, with a stated preference for giving up work after marriage.

For easier reference, these variations in work and income are captured in the table below:

After sending the invites from one of these profiles based on the randomization, I monitored the responses from male suitors for a period of 30 days. Male suitors could accept, decline or choose to not respond or request a photo.

### Findings

My findings (Dhar, 2023) show that *women who have never worked are likely to get the highest number of positive responses from male users* (around 70%), as shown in Figure

Figure 1: Treatment arms

Work Income	None	Lower than male suitor	Higher than male suitor
None	NW		
Pre-marriage only		LIW	HIW
Pre & post-marriage		LIW+	HIW+

Source: Author's conceptualization



2. Women who have worked but are willing to give up work after marriage receive around 66% of responses. However, women who want to continue working after marriage are far less likely to receive positive responses. Their acceptance rates are at 59.6% and 54.7% for the high-income (HIW+) and low-income (LIW+) groups respectively. This represents a statistically significant difference in overall response rates of 10 to 15 percentage points from the Never Worked (NW) group, which can be attributed solely to women's stated desire to work after marriage. This implies that women who have never worked receive 15%-22% more interest in the marriage market compared to women who want to keep working. For every 100 men who respond to a woman who has never worked, only 78-85 men will respond to a woman who wants to keep working.

I find the same results in the regression analyses across specifications (Figure 3): men are consistently less interested in women who work. However, it's not the women who earn more relatively who are penalized most. Income acts as a sweetener—women who earn more receive *more* interest, not less, than their lower-earning peers. As Figure 3 shows, men were 10 percentage points less likely to respond to career-oriented women who earn more than them (HIW+ group). They were 15 percentage points less likely to respond to career women who earned less than them (LIW+ group). The findings show that women who want to work but earn less than their male suitors elicit the least interest.

So what explains this sizeable and significant penalty for career-oriented women?

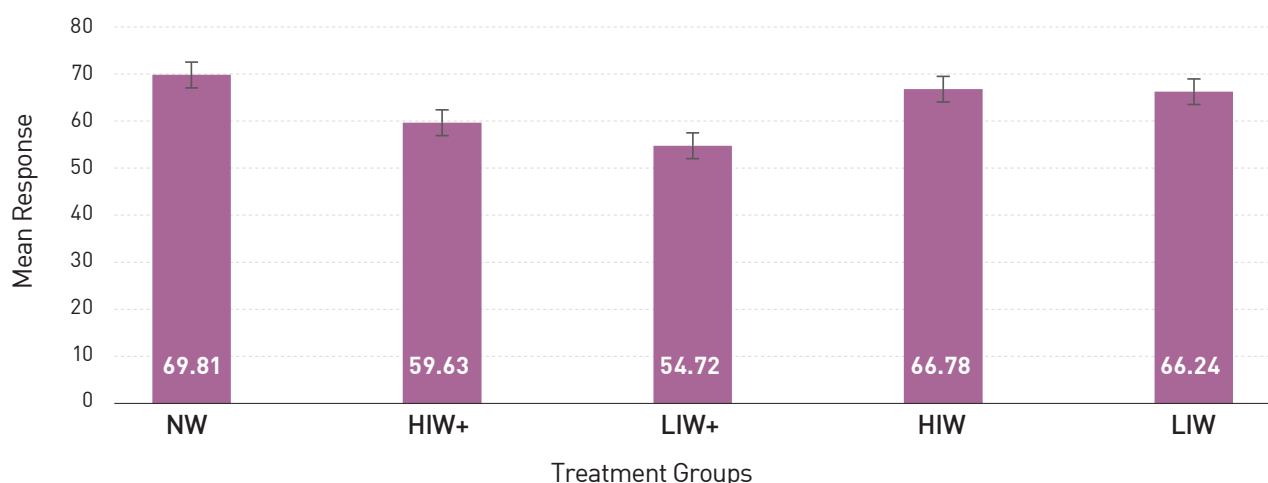
First, I find these differences are largely driven by the relatively higher castes in the (limited caste) sample such as Brahmins and Agarwals. Next, I explore a few mechanisms by looking across treatment arms in the paper. I find no evidence to support a *Human Capital Development* channel where there would be a greater preference for women with some work experience before marriage, even if they were choosing to stay at home and not breaking the 'male breadwinner' norm. I find a weak effect of the *Income* channel, where income mitigates some of the penalty career women face, with a stronger preference for higher-earning women. I conclude that the *Gender Norms* channel is dominant in explaining these results, given the strong differences in preferences for all women who want to work after marriage.

### Conclusion

The unfortunate reality is that there is a sizeable penalty in the marriage market for women who express an interest in pursuing a career after work. My research shows that working women, who want to continue working after marriage, are likely to receive significantly lower interest from male suitors. These results are predominant for relatively higher castes in the caste hierarchy, potentially given associations with more conservative gender attitudes around women's work and purity. Finally, I also conclude that marital preferences

Even among people using matrimonial websites, women who want to continue working after marriage get lower interest than women who do not plan to work.

Figure 2: Mean responses from male users



Note: Mean response on the y-axis is the proportion of responses by male suitors to all invites received from each treatment group. The standard error bars represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3: Regression results

Variable	Linear Model 1	Logit Model 2	Linear Model 3	Logit Model 4	T-test 5
	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)
HIW+	-0.102*** (0.026)	0.55*** (0.08)	-0.101*** (0.028)	0.63*** (0.08)	
LIW+	-0.150*** (0.027)	0.43*** (0.06)	-0.150*** (0.028)	0.52*** (0.06)	0.049** (0.029)
HIW	-0.035 (0.025)	0.81 (0.11)	-0.000 (0.028)	0.86 (0.11)	
LIW	-0.042* (0.024)	0.77* (0.11)	-0.035 (0.028)	0.84 (0.10)	0.005 (0.028)
Covariates Control Mean	Yes 69.81	Yes	No 69.81	No	

Source: Author's computation. Note: Significance level: \*\*\*p < 0.01, \*\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.1

are largely driven by conservative gender norms, and the woman's income has a weak effect at best.

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## 5. The Emergence of Educational Hypogamy in India

By Zhiyong Lin (The University of Texas at San Antonio)

The expansion of women's education globally has brought about significant changes in the dynamics of the marriage market and assortative mating patterns (Van Bavel et al. 2018). In India, the trends in educational assortative mating align with the global experience in some aspects while deviating in others. As expected, the expansion of women's education

Proportion of women who marry men with lower education levels than themselves increased from about 5% to nearly 20% between 1970s and 2000s.

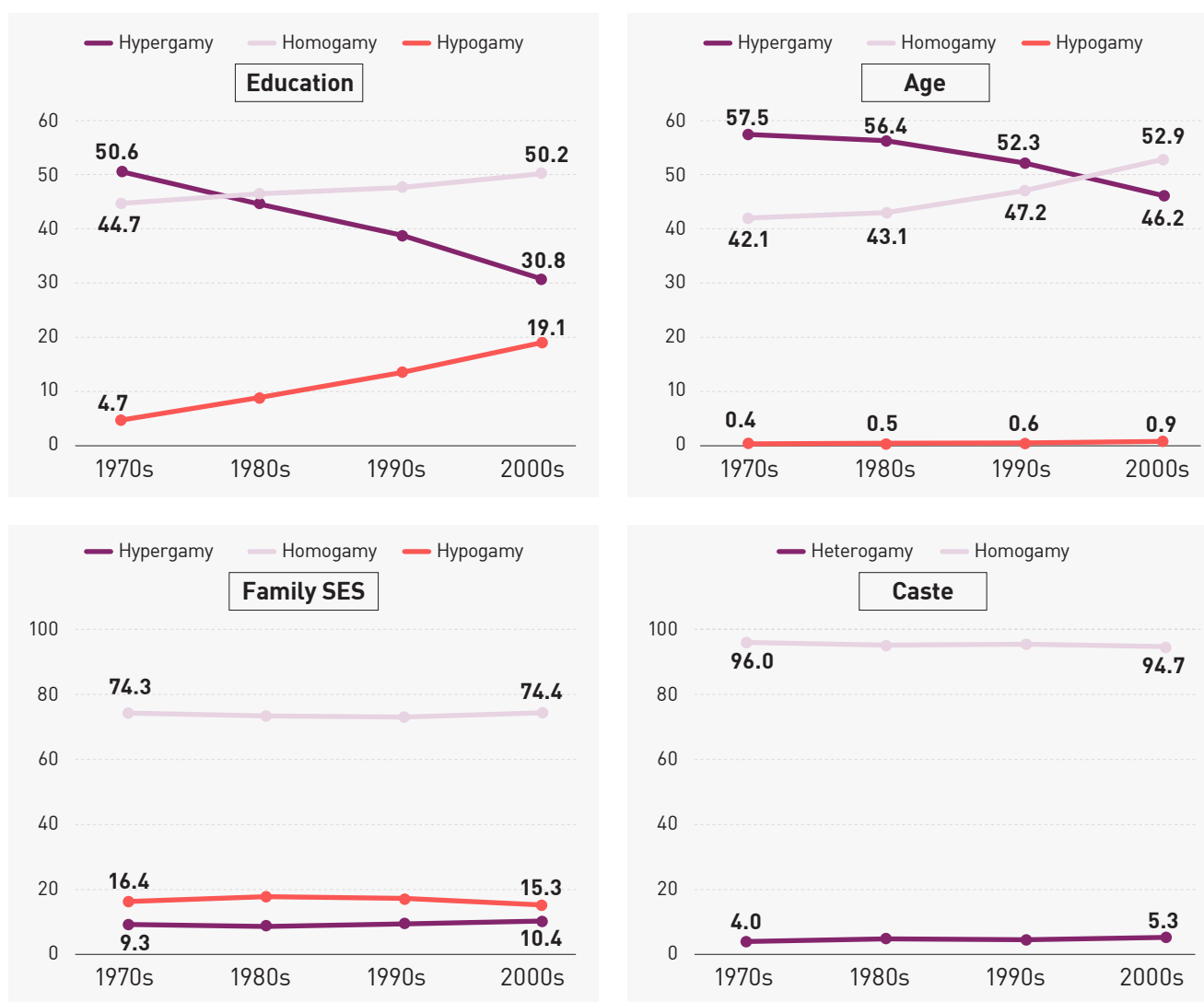
in India has reduced the incidence of hypergamy, where women marry men with higher education. There has been, in fact, a notable increase in hypogamy, where women marry men with lower education levels.

To gain a deeper understanding of these trends, our study (Lin et al. 2020) draws upon data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) conducted in 2011-2012. This nationally representative survey provides valuable insights into the evolving patterns of spousal educational differences in India. By examining recent marriage cohorts, we can explore how educational hypogamy has evolved over time. Figure 1 shows changes in the assortative mating patterns by education, age, family socioeconomic status (SES), and caste for Indian marriages between 1970 and 2012. Although the rise in hypogamy might suggest a more egalitarian and flexible approach to

marriage in India, a closer look at the data reveals that other boundaries, typical of a patriarchal society, remain rigid. Marrying younger men, inter-caste marriages, and unions with men from lower economic backgrounds are still uncommon. This indicates that despite educational hypogamy, the broader norms of gender inequality persist (Allendorf and Pandian 2016).

Our study shows that the increase in educational hypogamy can be attributed to several factors. First, the expansion of education has led to improvements in educational attainment for both men and women, along with a reduction in the gender gap over time. However, economic resources seem to play a more significant role than education credentials in mate selection. Women with higher education levels who marry down in terms of educational matching are more likely to come from

Figure 1. Assortative Mating by Education, Age, Family SES, and Caste from 1970 to 2012



Source: 2011-2012 India Human Development (IHDS)

families with lower economic status compared to their husbands' families. This highlights the importance of economic considerations in marriage decisions (Prakash and Singh 2014).

Furthermore, our analysis reveals that women majoring in fields associated with poorer labor market outcomes in India, such as humanities and social sciences, are increasingly involved in hypogamous marriages. This reflects the uneven distribution of educational returns in the labor market, particularly for women in transitional economies. Despite the expansion of education, female labor force participation in India remains low, even among those with college degrees (Chatterjee et al. 2018). This disparity prevents women who marry down in terms of educational attainment from achieving economic parity with their husbands.

In addition to socioeconomic status, other social boundaries unique to the Indian context contribute to the likelihood of educational hypogamy. Our analysis suggests a positive association between consanguineous marriages (within the family) and hypogamy, particularly in regions where intra-family marriages are prevalent due to limited eligible partners outside the family. Moreover, the availability of eligible men with higher secondary education negatively impacts the odds of educational hypogamy. In areas with a scarcity of eligible men, marrying down in terms of education may become a woman's only option in a society where universal marriage is the norm.

The IHDS data provide valuable insights into the complexities of educational assortative mating in India. It highlights the need to consider not only educational attainment but also factors such as economic resources, cultural norms, and social boundaries when analyzing marriage patterns. The rise in educational hypogamy in India does not signify a breakdown of gender barriers or a promising shift in gender norms. Instead, it reflects the intricate interplay of various factors in the Indian society.

While the expansion of women's education is a significant step toward gender equality, it is important to address the

underlying structural barriers that hinder the translation of educational advantages into economic gains. Achieving true gender equality in marriage and society requires a comprehensive approach that tackles these challenges. The IHDS data serve as a valuable resource for researchers and policymakers seeking to understand and address the complexities of educational assortative mating in India, ultimately fostering greater gender equality and empowerment.

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## 6. Conversation with Poonam Muttreja

(Executive Director, Population Foundation of India)

In 2014, the Population Foundation of India launched “Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon” ([MKBKSH](#)), designed to empower women through the dissemination of knowledge and awareness using mass media channels, such as radio and television.

### 1. How do you think the series impacted the youth, especially adolescent girls? Did they have any impact on parents and how they treat their girl children?

Population Foundation of India (PFI) launched Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon (MKBKSH)—‘I, A Woman, Can Achieve Anything’, an entertainment-education initiative in 2014, to promote gender equality, empowerment of women and improved health-seeking behaviors within families and communities. A total of 183 episodes over three seasons of MKBKSH have been broadcast till date over Doordarshan (DD) and All India Radio (AIR). The viewers who watched the programme comprised 52% women and 48% men. 40% of the respondents who watched the series were in the age group of 15-24 years. MKBKSH has been able to make a difference across India, with women and girls raising their voices against the practice of early marriage, showing confidence to discuss and negotiate on issues such as family planning and domestic violence. The series impacted the youth positively.

- i. The evaluation of season 1 showed that the proportion of young girls who felt that early marriage led to a loss of opportunity for education increased significantly from 24% in the baseline survey to 39% in the endline survey. The evaluation showed the proportion of women exposed to the series who thought that the “ideal age for a woman to have her first child is 21-25 years” increased from the baseline figure of 38% to 46%.
- ii. In season 2, the programme helped the youth—who watched it—understand that practising family planning (FP) would lead to the financial well-being of the family in comparison to the youth in the comparison group.

- iii. The viewers of MKBKSH Season 3 indicated a significantly higher level of perceived importance for a girl and her parents to delay her marriage until she completes her education and starts earning than non-viewers, and also at post-test compared to pretest.

### 2. Can you talk a bit more about the “Reel to Real” series and how it influenced parents in investing in girls’ education?

From amongst the issues showcased in the MKBKSH series, the Population Foundation of India documented and produced five films based on the change in behaviours and released them as a series—‘Reel to Real’. These films are based on inspiring role models, both women and men, who are leading change or have challenged social norms in their respective communities influenced by MKBKSH.

21-year-old **Ladkuwar Khushwaha** is the first girl from her village in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh to go to college. She has had to battle the wrath of upper-caste men in the village who didn't want her to study out of fear that the suppressed girls and women from their families would want to do the same. Inspired by the show MKBKSH, she convinced her parents to abandon their plans for her marriage. “Invest in my education what you want to give for my dowry,” she told them. Armed with a supportive family and a drive to take charge of her own life, Ladkunwar inspired 10 more girls in the village to take up higher studies.

### 3. Do you think that these kinds of edutainment series can increase women’s agency in marital decisions?

The entertainment-education strategy draws directly upon Bandura's (1977 and 1997) social learning theory, which posits that an individual learns by observing and imitating the overt behaviour of other individuals who serve as role models for the new behaviour, thereby gaining a sense of self-efficacy (an individual's belief that he or she is able to control specific outcomes in life)<sup>6</sup>. Entertainment-Education is designed to influence behaviour within the framework of content that is entertaining, intentionally

6. Rogers, M. Everett, et al. *Effects of an Entertainment-Education Radio Soap Opera on Family Planning Behavior in Tanzania*. s.l. : Population Council, 1999

weaving important health and social issues into powerful storytelling that draw in millions of viewers. Over the last few decades, entertainment-education has been successfully used globally, especially in Mexico, Brazil, and South Africa, to enhance knowledge, change behaviour and transform social norms on gender rights and young people's issues.

According to a third-party evaluation of the second season of MKBKSH, married women exposed to the programme were 1.1 times more likely to initiate a discussion on family planning as compared to women from the un-exposed group. Also, married female viewers were 1.2 times more likely to use modern contraceptives in the next 6 months compared to married female non-viewers.

The story of one of the Reel to Real heroes—'Nirma Devi'—was chosen for inclusion in BBC's 100 Women initiative.<sup>7</sup> Nirma Devi was inspired by MKBKSH to spread the word on contraception within her community, going against the established social norms, thus "normalizing what most of India considers taboo.. You'd see her husband shy away from some questions, but not Nirma Devi. She attributes this change to watching MKBKSH along with the intervention by a local NGO.

**4. (a) What according to you should be the approach for increasing women's agency in marriage? (b) Can you please share more about your initiative on "#LambiSagai" and the effect it may have had on women's agency? (c) How do men react to such initiatives?**

(a) Increasing women's agency in a marriage requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both social norms and individual empowerment. This would involve providing girls and women with access to quality education and life skills training, promoting awareness about women's rights, strengthening legal frameworks that protect women, and enabling their economic empowerment. Furthermore, challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes requires efforts to educate men about gender equality, consent, and respect. Promoting positive masculinity and fostering male allies can help create a supportive environment for women's agency in marriages. As said earlier, entertainment-education has globally been found effective in challenging traditional norms and stereotypes about gender roles and promoting positive deviance in the community. The findings of the evaluation from the series illustrated that reinforcement

of messages on the harmful effects of child marriages brought about a positive shift in the attitude of girls and parents who were exposed to the program.

(b) **Lambi Sagai** (i.e., delaying one's marriage) was a marker repeated in different ways by different characters, essentially highlighting the romantic relationships among them. Similarly, *Aurat Ki Marzi Ka Din* (the day women decide) was used as a marker to promote women's role in decision-making. Markers are new words, phrases, visual representations, and practices that are well-aligned with a project's social objectives and represent an innovative strategy to not only promote new social realities but also track how the audience engages with them over time.

The Population Foundation of India incorporated in its communication strategies and research methods the markers related to family planning, women's empowerment, and gender equality in all three seasons of *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon*. The repeated-measures analysis of the field experiment data by independent evaluators showed significant effects of viewership and time on the idea of Lambi Sagai. Viewers' perceived importance for a girl to delay marriage, until she finishes education and starts earning, was higher than non-viewers', and also grew over time from baseline to endline. This pattern applied to both male and female viewers, single and married.

(c) **Men in Chhatarpur:** Men must play an equal part in women's empowerment, and this group of men in Chhatarpur, MP, has done just that after watching MKBKSH. Habitual wife-beaters have turned into empathetic partners and those who only wanted boys have gone for sterilisation even after one girl child. This transformation occurred because local NGOs used the medium of MKBKSH to show a mirror to the men on their unequal, unfair and violent behaviours. They have made small changes in their lives, which includes helping their wives with daily chores and ending gender-based violence.

**5. Child marriage is still practiced in several regions of the country, albeit at a falling rate over the years. What kind of approach can the government adopt to encourage increases in women's age at marriage? What do you think will be the effect of increasing women's legal age of marriage?**

Early marriage has societal sanction and is, ironically, seen as a solution by the communities, not as a problem.

7. [100 Women: Breaking the contraception taboo in India](#)



Photo: MKBKSH

Increasing the legal age of marriage without a shift in communities' perceptions around the practice can have several negative consequences. Increasing the legal age will mean a large number of married persons will be deemed underage, thereby putting a question mark around the legality of their marriages.

While we undoubtedly need to work hard to implement laws around child marriage and ensure girls get marriage after the legal age, we must also work towards addressing the root causes of early marriages. One way to end the practice of child marriage is to provide girls an equal opportunity in education and professional skilling to fulfil their dreams and aspirations in addition to bringing about an attitudinal change among communities.

The government must ensure the convergence of efforts of various government departments, civil society organizations, and other development partners in ending the prevalence of child marriage.

We must also invest in targeted social and behaviour change communication strategies to end child marriages. Population Foundation of India's transmedia initiative *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon* (I, A Woman, Can Achieve Anything) is one such example. The findings from an evaluation of the series illustrated that reinforcement of messages on the harmful effects of child marriage brought about a positive shift in the attitude of girls and parents

who were exposed to the program.

Finally, the government must prioritize access to information and services on sexual and reproductive health, mental health, and nutrition services for women and girls, especially those from the most marginalized communities to ensure that no one is left behind.

## **6. How important is education for enhancing women's decision-making power in the marital household? According to you, how much does women's age at marriage matter in post-marriage household decision-making?**

National Family Health Survey - NFHS 5 (2019-21) has observed a decline in the percentage of women aged 20-24 years who married before the age of 18. However, it is still high at 23% against 27% in NFHS 4 (2015-16). The survey shows that women who had 12 or more years of schooling marry much later than other women. The median age at first marriage for women aged 25-49 increases from 17.1 years for women with no schooling to 22.8 years for women with 12 or more years of schooling.

Education plays a critical role in enhancing women's decision-making power within the marital household. Education promotes the idea that women have an equal right to participate in decision-making processes and have their opinions valued and respected. But it should not be viewed as the sole determinant of decision-making authority within a post-marriage household. The impact should be considered within the broader context of societal, cultural, and individual circumstances.

In particular, regressive societal (patriarchal) norms often end up compromising the woman's decision-making powers if it's found to be in conflict with the man's. It is therefore essential to address the societal norms, practices, and stereotypes through social and behaviour change communication initiatives such as *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon*.

*Poonam Muttreja is the Executive Director of Population Foundation of India. For over 40 years, she has been a strong advocate for women's health, reproductive and sexual rights, and rural livelihoods. Before joining Population Foundation of India, she served as the India Country Director of the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation for 15 years.*





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