IMPACT OF EARLY MARRIAGE ON MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG WOMEN OF A PERI URBAN VILLAGE OF NORTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Early marriage has long been a problem in developing countries as it not only affects the health of girls but also deprives them of a childhood that they rightfully deserve. Apart from this, marital relationship in case of early marriage is also not as fruitful as compared to late marriages owing to emotional immaturity of the females. **Methods:** This study was conducted to estimate the prevalence of early marriage and its association with marital relationship. It was a community based cross-sectional study conducted among 322 married females in field practice areas of JNU-IMRC, Jaipur, Rajasthan. **Result:** The study found that 53.4% of the females had married before the age of 18 years. Significant association of marital age was observed with education status, socioeconomic status, nature of employment and education status of the male partner (p<0.05). Also, choosing friends and expressing opinions to elders, as a part of autonomy and self-efficacy, respectively, were found to be associated with early marriage (p>0.05). **Conclusion:**The study established that early marriages are still prevalent in the country. Ongoing efforts through the existing programs in the country need to reach the right audience especially in the rural areas.

Keywords: Early marriage, marital relationship, women autonomy, women self-efficacy

INTRODUCTION

According to UNICEF, any child under the age of 18 years going into an informal union or a formal marriage with an adult or another child, is considered under the definition of Child Marriage (UNICEF India, 2017). It is regarded as a result of deep-rooted gender inequality, which affects girls disproportionately. It has been estimated that, globally, around 21% of girls, some 12 million, get married before their 18th birthday every year('Child marriage around the world', | UNICEF, 2020) Currently, India places after Bangladesh, Nepal, and Afghanistan in terms of child marriage prevalence and it is reported that one in every three child brides live in India, accounting for 27% of the total early marriages(UNICEF, 2019).

UNICEF is constantly working toward the goal of elimination of early marriage with various interventions and in collaboration with various governments all

over the world. The whole world is seriously concerned related to child marriage, especially, since it is included in one of the targets of Sustainable Development Goals. Its focus is to absolutely abolish the practice by 2030 and in this context, an indicator, 5.3.1, is set to measure proportion of women, aged 20 to 24 years, married or in a union, since they were below 15 and 18 years(UNICEF, 2019).

From the statistics for early marriages among girls in India, it can be comprehended that more than 50% of the total early marriages are reported in five states of the country, which include Uttar Pradesh as the leading state, contributing to the burden with 36 million child brides, followed by Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. More than 40% of young women were married in childhood in Bihar (43%) and West Bengal (42%) compared to a mere 2% in Lakshadweep. Over the decades, however, it has been found that the trend for early marriage has been decreasing from 74% of girls being married before 18 years during the 1970s to 27% of underage marriage in 2015 which can be regarded as a great improvement in this field. However, India has a long way to go for the elimination of this detrimental practice and it would need dedicated and re-enforced efforts for the same.

Early marriages have been reported to result in higher school dropout rates, low wages and high unemployment rates, not to mention the poor health status and higher crime rates against women(Dahl, 2010). Poverty, protection of the adolescent girls and reinforcement of social ties are considered to be the principal causes which lead to this stigmatized custom (Mahato, 2016). Along with this, girls from rural background are also reported to be at a higher risk of this practice(Child marriage. UNICEF, 2020). Albeit reported primarily among girls, even boys have not been exempted from this tradition, although the prevalence of the same among the males is quite low.

Marital relationship is a multi-dimensional concept, and, for a good relationship, dimensions: like communication, conflict, interactions/activities with the spouse, autonomy in decision-making and self-efficacy play a crucial role. In India, especially in rural background, much of this is rooted with the features of the joint family structure. Timing of marriage was found to be closely associated with the nature of a woman's marital relationship in different aspects like not having a close marital relationship with their spouses (Barua and Kurz, 2001) or facing an increased risk of physical and sexual violence (Joshi et al., 2001; Jejeebhoy and Bott, 2003). It has also been stated before that female empowerment is the process of amassing women's access to control the tactical choices in life that affect them, and access to the opportunities that allow them fully to realize their capabilities(Chen and Tanaka, 2014).

Limited researches are available, especially in India, on how early marriage may limit young women's lives and compromise their choices. Particularly, not much has been documented regarding the association between age at marriage and authority in marital relationships, self-efficacy, communication and interaction with spouse. In India, although the constitution grants gender equality to both the sexes (Saryal, 2014) in its preamble itself, the same is far from achieved owing to various challenges in the society, which majorly include violence against women and gender discrimination (Sama, 2017). Keeping the above discussed social problems in mind, the present study was conducted to find out the prevalence of early marriage in the study area, its socio- demographic determinants,

and its association with measures of marital relationship.

METHODS

This study was a cross-sectional community-based study, which was conducted among the registered families in the field practice areas under JNU-IMSRC, Jaipur, Rajasthan, during first half of 2019 after taking ethical clearance from the concerned committee (JNUIMSRC/IEC/2019/60). Literature review revealed that the prevalence of child marriage in India is 27% *(*National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) 2015-16 INDIA*, 2017). Assuming this prevalence with relative error of 5% at level of significance of 95%, the sample size was calculated.

The equation used for calculating sample size is as follows:

$$n= Z^2 P (1-P)/e^2$$

where,

Z = level of confidence - 95% (1.96)
P = prevalence of early marriage
e = margin of error

The sample size came out to be approximately 303. Assuming non- response rate to be 5%, 322 married females were taken up for the study. A house-to-house survey was conducted by the investigators in the rural field practice area of JNU-IMSRC. A random village from the study area was selected by lottery method and a house in the village was selected randomly for data collection and every alternate house was taken for survey until target sample size was achieved. A semi-coded, pre-designed, pretested questionnaire in local language (Hindi) was used to collect the relevant information (Santhya et al., 2010). For the better understanding of the questions by the participants, required changes were made before the final survey and the questions were rearranged to ensure efficiency. All participants gave the informed consent prior to be a part of the study.

Statistical Package for Social Sciences 20.0 (SPSS 20.0) software was used for data analysis. Categorical data were interpreted by proportions and percentages. Chi-square test was used to find significance and $p < 0.05$ was considered significant.

Inclusion Criteria: In order to minimize recall bias, only women with 10 years of married life were considered for the study. Availability of marriage certificate was sought to confirm age at marriage. Antenatal and child birth related events were established with available record documents, such as antenatal card. In cases of inability to produce these records, oral response from the respondent was noted.

Exclusion Criteria: Those with married life more than 10 years and those not giving consent to participate in the study.

RESULTS

According to the study, it was found that more than half (n= 172, 53.4%) of the study participants reported to have been married before the legal age of 18 years.

The mean age of the women and their counterparts, at the time of conducting this study, was found to be almost the same (figure 1). A difference of more than three years was observed in the mean duration of marriage between females married early and those married after attaining the legal age. The mean marital age of early married females was reported to be less than the legal age of marriage, by more than two years as 15.84±1.92 while male partners had their mean marital age less by more than a year as 19.97±3.49 years, which is 21 years for boys in India.
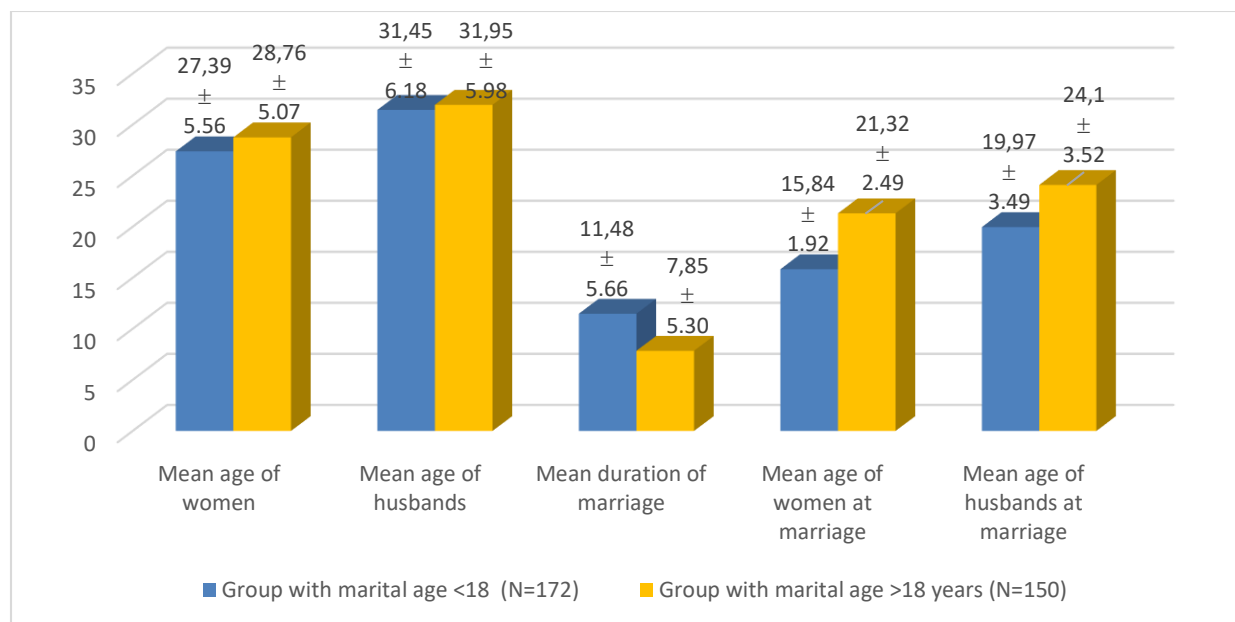
Figure 1. Showing mean age of the participants at the time of study and marriage, as well as mean duration of marriage in the two study groups.

As for the socio-demographic determinants, statistically non-significant association was found between marital age and religion where the majority of females married under 18 years of age belonged to Hinduism while the rest were Muslims. Similarly, in case of females married after 18 years of age, 80% were followers of Hindu religion while the rest were Muslims. Statistically significant associations (p<0.05) were found between marital age and educational status, socioeconomic status, nature of employment and education status of the male partner. It was observed that practice of marriage before 18 years of age was more prevalent among females who were illiterate (n= 61, 35.5%), belonged to middle socioeconomic status (n=102, 59.3%), whose husbands were involved in labor (n=81, 47.1%) and had maximum education up to high school (n=138, 80.2%). Statistically non-significant association of early marital age was observed with employment status and marital status of the females (p>0.05) (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic parameters and their association with the marital age

Parameter	Marital age <18 years N (%)	Marital age >18 years) N (%)	P-value
Religion			
Hindu	128 (74.4)	120 (80.0)	0.38
Muslim	44 (25.6)	30 (30.0)	
Educational status			**0.00**
Illiterate	61 (35.5)	25 (16.7)	
Primary	33 (19.2)	14 (9.3)	
High School	58 (33.7)	53 (35.3)	
Senior Secondary	11 (6.4)	14 (9.3)	

Parameter	Marital age <18 years N (%)	Marital age >18 years) N (%)	P-value
Graduate	8 (4.7)	25 (16.7)	
Post Graduate	1 (0.6)	19 (12.7)	
Employment status			0.28
Employed	128 (74.4)	120 (80)	
Home maker	44 (25.6)	30 (30)	
Socioeconomic status			**0.00**
Low	70 (40.7)	28 (18.7)	
Middle	102 (59.3)	122 (81.3)	
Marital status			0.99
Divorced/ Separated	2 (1.2)	2 (1.3)	
Currently Married	170 (98.8)	148 (98.7)	
Husband's Employment			**0.00**
Private Job	49 (28.5)	81 (54.0)	
Driver	31 (18.0)	14 (9.3)	
Government Job	2 (1.2)	12 (8.0)	
Self-Employed	1(0.6)	2 (1.3)	
Labor	81 (47.1)	29 (19.3)	
Others	8 (4.7)	12 (8.0)	
Husband's Education			**0.00**
Illiterate	48 (27.9)	14 (9.3)	
Primary	16 (9.3)	12 (8.0)	
High School	74 (43.0)	40 (26.7)	
Senior Secondary	11 (6.4)	19 (12.7)	
Graduate	18 (10.5)	49 (32.7)	
Postgraduate	5 (2.9)	16 (10.7)	
Total	**172 (100)**	**150 (100)**	

Assessment of relationship with the spouse was made across various themes including communication with him on general concerns, reproductive concerns, interactions with him in the last six months, and physical or sexual violence. Statistically, highly significant (p<0.001) association of marital age was observed with communication on general concerns which included whether the spouse discussed how to spend money, about in-laws, and other general matters with the spouse. The majority of the participants, in both the groups, reported their involvement in financial decision-making, but it was comparatively less in early married ones (Table 2). Similarly, in-laws issues were discussed with 51.7% early married women compared to 67.3% late married while communication on general matters with the spouse also reported to be significantly less among the early married females. In case of discussion with spouse regarding reproductive concerns, it was found that half of the early married females discussed when/ whether to have children, compared to 65.3% in the other group (p<0.001).Similarly, only 49.4% early married couples had a discussion about contraceptive usage, compared to 62% couples, who married after 18 years

(p=0.02).Also, less than half (44.2%) of the early married respondents discussed reproductive matters with their spouses in the last six months in contrast to 60% females who were considered in the other group (p<0.001). Statistical association was found to be highly significant in case of spousal interactions within the last six months, which included going for movies, other places of entertainment and visiting a woman's natal home (p<0.05). (Table 2)

Statistically, non-significant results (p>0.05) were observed in case of spousal violence when the participants were asked about whether their husbands had taken part in violence against them (n=148, 86.0%) or forced to engage in sex (n= 158, 91.1%) among females having age less than 18 years at the time of marriage (Table 2).

Regarding decision-making autonomy and self-efficacy or subjectivity, it was found that significantly fewer number of females in early married group had the freedom of choosing friends (45.3%) and same trend was observed in autonomy in purchasing clothes for themselves and spending money on other affairs. Both of these associations were statistically not significant (p>0.05). Only 36.6% of the participants, among the early married ones, reported that they were unable to express their opinions to elders (p>0.05). However, the same was the case with being able to confront people who said/ did wrong (57.6%) and expression of the opinions to elders in the family (52.3%), but statistical association in both these cases was not found to be significant (p>0.05).

Table 2. Marital relationship measures and their association with marital age

Marital relationship measures		Female age at marriage		p-value
		Less than 18 years N (%)	More than 18 years N (%)	
Communication on general concerns				
Spouse discusses how to spend money	NO	69 (40.1)	38 (25.3)	**0.00**
	YES	103 (59.9)	112 (74.7)	
Spouse discusses in-law issues	NO	83 (48.3)	49 (32.7)	**0.00**
	YES	89 (51.7)	101 (67.3)	
Spousal communication on other general matters	NO	86 (50.0)	53 (35.3)	**0.00**
	YES	86 (50.0)	97 (64.7)	
Communication on reproductive concerns				
	NO	86 (50.0)	52 (34.7)	**0.00**

Marital relationship measures		Female age at marriage		p-value
		Less than 18 years N (%)	More than 18 years N (%)	
Spouse discussed when/whether to have children	YES	86 (50.0)	98 (65.3)	
Spouse discusses contraceptive use	NO	87 (50.6)	57 (38.0)	**0.02**
	YES	85 (49.4)	93 (62.0)	
Spousal communication on reproductive matters	NO	96 (55.8)	60 (40.0)	**0.00**
	YES	76 (44.2)	90 (60.0)	
Last six months spousal interactions				
Went to see movie together in past 6 months	NO	151 (87.8)	111 (74.0)	**0.00**
	YES	21 (12.2)	39 (26.0)	
Visited other place of entertainment in past 6 months	NO	140 (81.4)	89 (59.3)	**0.00**
	YES	32 (18.6)	61 (40.7)	
Visited woman's natal home in past 6 months	NO	71 (41.3)	40 (26.7)	**0.00**
	YES	101 (58.7)	110 (73.3)	
Spousal violence				
Physical violence*	NO	148 (86.0)	133 (88.7)	0.50
	YES	24 (14.0)	17 (11.3)	
Sexual violence**	NO	14 (8.1)	16 (10.7)	0.45
	YES	158 (91.1)	134 (89.3)	

Marital relationship measures		Female age at marriage		p-value
		Less than 18 years N (%)	More than 18 years N (%)	
Decision-making autonomy				
Autonomy in choosing friends	NO	94 (54.7)	53 (35.3)	**0.00**
	YES	78 (45.3)	97 (64.7)	
Autonomy in purchasing clothes	NO	53 (30.8)	33 (22.0)	0.08
	YES	119 (69.2)	117 (78)	
Autonomy in spending money	NO	48 (27.9)	31 (20.7)	0.15
	YES	124 (72.1)	119 (79.3)	
Self-efficacy				
Able to express opinions to elders or confront them if they are wrong/ challenge individuals who said/did anything unsuitable	NO	63 (36.6)	39 (26.0)	**0.04**
	YES	109 (63.4)	111 (74.0)	

*pushed, punched, slapped, kicked, dragged, choked, shaken or beaten
**ever forced her to have sex

DISCUSSION

A number of laws exist against child marriage, yet this practice remains prevalent. Globally, 1 out of every 5 girls is married or made to be in union before reaching her 18th birthday. In many third world countries, 12% of girls gets married before the age of 15 years and 40%before the age of 18(Child marriage, United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA]-) In India, 40% of the females are reported to be married before reaching the legal age.(National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) 2015-16 INDIA, 2017) In our study, the prevalence of early marriage was found to be 53.4% in the study population, much higher than the state average, and a lot more than a study conducted in Manipur, which stated prevalence of the same as 36.22% (Singh, Indira and Minita, 2014), Bihar, which has prevalence of 42.5%, Rajasthan- having prevalence of 35.4% as well as above the national average *(National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) 2015-16 INDIA,* 2017).

According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, the median age at marriage for females in the country has been observed to be 19.0 years, while for men it is 24.5 years; both of which have seen a rise from 17.2 years and 22.6 years, respectively.

In the present study, however, the mean age at marriage of women marrying before the legal age was found to be 15.84±1.92 years, while for men it was 19.97±3.49 years. A study conducted in Sudan reported concordant findings with the present study with mean age of marriage at 15.4 years (Ali et al., 2014). The practice of early marriage was found to be more prevalent in case of Hindus (74.4%) which was concordant with another study which also reported higher prevalence of the same among Hindus, probably because of social, economic and health perspectives (Parab, 2016). A study in Nigeria reported Islam to be a contributor toward higher number of child brides (Ali et al., 2014). In a country like this, religion has a vital role in defining values and practices at personal, family and community level, including the developmental issues of girls and young children (Ali et al., 2014).

As this study was conducted in rural population, the higher prevalence of early marriage (53.4%) is similar to the finding in other studies conducted in countries like Bangladesh and Nigeria (Ali et al., 2014; Haq, 2018). Patriarchy, coercion, social customs, and norms could be mentioned as principal determinants in case of forcing girls into marrying early (Seth et al., 2018) Education, almost universally, plays a protective effect in delaying early marriage, both among girls and boys. In a country like India, where male dominance is very much apparent in the society, gender disparity is intensely ingrained in its social and cultural standards, and, consequently, girls falls short on educational prospects in their upcoming life. School and college dropout, especially before the completion of secondary education, is very much evident because of early marriage (Paul, 2019). In the current study, as well as those done previously, an inverse association of education status has been observed in child marriage prevalence (Ali et al., 2014). Early marriage and

socioeconomic status are also found to have a significant association wherein females belonging to lower socioeconomic status have higher chances of getting married early. The same has been depicted in studies conducted in various countries worldwide (Vang and Bogenschutz, 2014; Efevbera et al., 2019) as well as in the country itself (Paul, 2020). Also, in our study, the results have been found to be consistent with other studies primarily because poor families often tend to think that marrying their girl child early will provide social and financial security to their daughters (Sandhu and Geethalakshmi, 2017). Cultural family structure, weak authority of females, and responsibility to fulfill needs also forces parents of a girl child to marry their child at a younger age (Montazeri et al., 2016).

In this study, husbands who were involved in labor as well as those having education until high school were more likely to marry females less than the national legal age of 18 years. This could be due to the societal pressures, and lack of proper education. Due to this, they are also more likely to discontinue their education and not be motivated to finish their studies (Kerckhoff and Parrow, 1979). The responsibility of financial management in our study was found to primarily rest with the male counterpart only, probably because, in Indian society, males are supposed to be playing the role of head of the family (Sharma Biswas and Mukhopadhyay, 2018). Spousal communication in case of contraceptive usage was not as prevalent among females who married early (49.4%). Apart from this, bearing of children (50.0%) was found as one of the areas where more than half of the under 18 brides did not have a say. Communication regarding reproductive matters was also not found to be a topic which was open to discussion with early brides (44.2%), as these females are considered to be subservient, so, decisions

regarding fertility and childbearing largely remained the domain of older female relatives. In case of young females, it has also been observed that they have little choice in selection of life partner as arranged marriages are usually the norm in South Asian countries, and they often do not get a chance to meet with their fiancé before marriage. The notion that the girl is 'old enough' to marry stems from the cultural belief that accomplishment to manage household work and physical maturity are sufficient for a girl to get married (Hamid, Stephenson and Rubenson, 2011).

Spousal violence has been reported to be fairly common in the study area as well as in other studies, including both physical and sexual violence, which may be because those women did not have the capacity in terms of education and income they hold, but also due to having very slim knowledge and awareness about their rights (Nadda et al., 2018). Although we did not find any significant difference between the two groups as far as violence with spouse is concerned, around 86% of the early married and 88.7% of females who married at the right age stated that they had been inflicted with physical violence while 91.1% among early married had suffered from sexual violence at one point of time or another. This reflects inherent gender discrimination that endures across our country. Men dominated society and culture in the family, and the leisure that male counterparts enjoy in rights, privileges, authority and power, reflects the deep-seated gender discrimination that persists across the country. Women's socialization into outranked place and rationalizing men to be the superior half with a right to dominate women consequently resulted in male patriarchy. This ultimately results in incapacity of women, which may promote violence against them and their inability of to defend themselves (Babu and Kar, 2009).

A study done in Cairo (Samari and Pebley, 2018) reported less autonomy for women as compared to men, similar to our study wherein early married females have less control over spending money, as well as choosing friends. It was found to be similar to another study conducted in Nepal wherein it was found that early marriage was significantly associated with younger women having less autonomy over personal and financial matters *(Acharya et al.,* 2010). This may be because of prevalent poverty as well as low socioeconomic status of the families. The social factors, while not straight-away tested in the models, are not encouraging to promote self-sufficiency. Also because of the custom that females are thought be answerable to their families in case of economic independence.

It is an established fact that society of residence determines self-sufficiency, above and beyond that of individual and household factors, and also it is considerably linked to personal, physical, and financial autonomy over time. Findings of our study showed that early married females had limited autonomy, in all aspects, compared to the females in other groups but the significant difference was only in choosing their friends. It was also found in various studies that females had more autonomy over spending money and personal decision-making as their age increases. The potential reason behind older women having more autonomy could be that they are able to win the trust of their husbands and gain stability in the form of children after the passage of time (Akram, 2018). Also, researchers noticed that a girl, who just entered in her new family through marriage, holds less decision-making autonomy in the household, plus a number of household duties are immediately expected from her side in the guidance of the mother-in-law, who usually remains the ultimate decision-maker in the family (Acharya et al., 2010).

As per the taboos prevalent in Indian society, compared to a man, a woman's selection rights are highly compromised in the married life. This makes women think that they not in control as far as the significant life events are concerned, which might become a cause of less self-efficiency. The self-efficiency viewpoints are vital perceptive interpretations which help to construct beliefs about future deeds and individual abilities. Feeling self-efficiency is also helpful for mental and physical health. High self-efficacy in the relationships makes people relatively more broad-minded toward sharing their marital life events and issues (Hamidian and Mousavi, 2015; Pour Fard et al., 2016; Poorbaferani, Mazaheri and Hasanzadeh, 2018).This is similar to the findings done in various other studies wherein it has been depicted that being self-sufficient has had a positive effect in their relationship with their partners as well as in-laws.

CONCLUSION

This study assures the reality that early marriages are very much prevalent in some parts of the country, and, despite the most earnest efforts over a long period of time, is still persisting as a mark of disgrace to our society, especially in the rural areas. Findings of the study stressed the need of programs that should take a note of the needs of these women, which are different from the adult married ones and also persuade the elders in the family to think that marriage before attaining the legal age compromises a young girl's life and choices in many ways. Efforts inclined toward breaking down social seclusion with encouraging couple interaction, cooperation and skills to manage any conflict, should be encouraged, to give these women, a better chance of controlling their lives.

It is evident that, through various existing programs and policies, to address the issue, the country recognizes the significance of preventing early marriages. So, it is imperative that such efforts should reach the right audience, including the decision-makers of their lives and the society as a whole, to achieve a better future perspective for the upcoming generation.

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