



Increasing Age At Marriage in Rural Maharashtra, India

Update 1

Can Life Skills Interventions Effectively Raise the Age at Marriage?

The Issue:

Adolescent girls are vulnerable to social and health risks that necessitate special attention being paid to this group. One such risk that perseveres in much of the world, including rural Maharashtra where the Institute for Health Management-Pachod (IHMP) is based, is early marriage. An extensive community-based study carried out by IHMP in 1998-9 showed that the median age at marriage for girls in Aurangabad district, rural Maharashtra, was alarmingly low at 14.5 years. Another important issue that emerged from this and other IHMP studies is the lack of educational opportunities for young girls: due to safety concerns, parents stop formal education for daughters if the school is outside the village. After discussions with parents, IHMP designed and is conducting a one-year life skills course for unmarried adolescent girls. The course aims to improve girls' self-esteem and literacy, and delay marriage.

The Life Skills Program at a Glance

Objectives:

1. Improve the social status of adolescent girls by developing skills related to gender, legal literacy, and team-building.
2. Improve adolescent girls' health status by increasing their cognitive and practical skills in health and nutrition.
3. Promote self-development and increase self-confidence and self-esteem through involvement in a community project, as well as arts and craft.
4. To delay age at marriage for adolescent girls by achieving all the above.

Structure: A one-year course, 1 hour each weekday evening, taught by a trained village woman with at least a 7th grade education. A total of 225 one-hour sessions, divided into 5 sections: Social Issues & Institutions; Local Bodies; Life Skills; Child Health and Nutrition; Health.

Target group: Unmarried adolescent girls ages 12-18 years, with a focus on out-of-school and working adolescents.

Current status of program: 300 rural girls already participated in the course. 2000 girls from 72 villages and 30 slums in Pune city currently enrolled.

Data and Methodology:

Data were collected at baseline in 1998-99, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. A quasi-experimental design is being used to study the impact of the life skills intervention. For the first round of the intervention, 17 study and 18 control villages are being compared. Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression is being used to examine the effect of the intervention on age at marriage. To examine trends over time, annual data on age at marriage has been collected in the study villages since 1997.

Impact of Life Skills Intervention on Age at Marriage—Some Key Results:

Attendance in life skills classes: Analysis from the first round of the life skills intervention shows a significant impact on age at marriage. From the sample of 1146 girls, only 9% of the girls who completed the course were married before the age of 18 years, compared to almost one-third of the

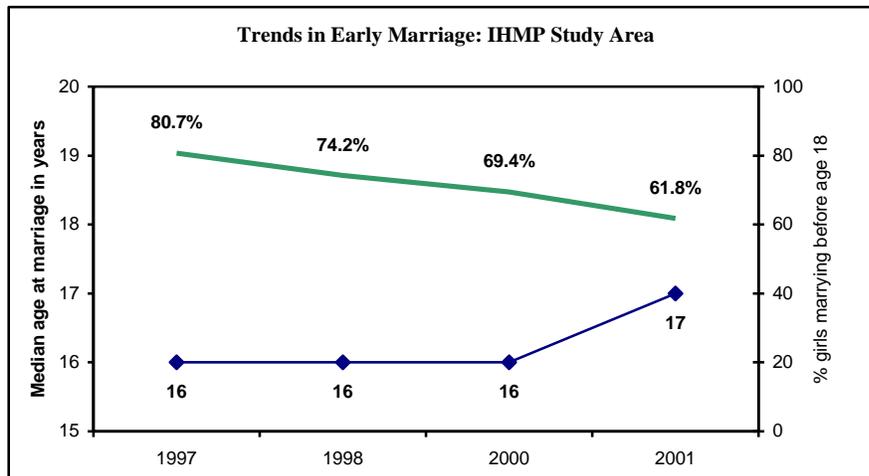
<i>Attendance</i>	<i>No. Of girls</i>	<i>%married <18 yrs</i>	<i>Adjusted OR⁺</i>
Complete	166	9.1	1 (reference)
Partial	243	22.6	2.42*
None	737	29.3	2.58*

N=1146; *p<0.05; +Adjusted for girls' age, current schooling status, education, SES, family type, mother's education, parents' occupation

girls who never attended. Logistic regression shows that, controlling for background characteristics, girls who never attended the course were more than two-and-a-half times more likely to get married before age 18 compared to girls who completed the course. Girls who attended partially married earlier than those who completed the course, but even partial attendance provided some protection against early marriage compared to those who never attended.

Exposure to life skills intervention: An analysis of determinants of early marriage among girls in the control and study areas shows that, after controlling for background characteristics, girls in the control area were almost 4 times more likely to be married before age 18 than girls in the intervention area.

Trends in age at marriage over time in study villages: Data on age at marriage in study villages between



1997-2001 shows a decrease in proportions of girls marrying before age 18, and an increase in the median age at marriage of 1 year. While other factors may also be at work, this trend supports the evidence that the life skills program in this area has contributed to delaying marriage.

Current Developments and Next Steps:

- The life skills curriculum has

been strengthened and enrollment expanded to respond to increased community demand.

- The course has been extended from rural to urban areas in Maharashtra.
- Ongoing analysis will detail the changes in cognitive and practical skills among adolescents participating in the program.
- IHMP presented preliminary results to the Government of Maharashtra, which is considering adopting, adapting, and expanding this program throughout the state.

The project:

Since 1999, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is collaborating with partners in India on multi-site intervention studies on adolescent reproductive health in India. The partners are Christian Medical College (CMC), the Institute for Health Management (IHMP), Swasthya, KEM Hospital Research Centre, and the Foundation for Research in Health Systems (FRHS). The project is supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.

IHMP is based in Pachod, rural Maharashtra, with an office in Pune city. The 1-year life skills course for adolescents profiled here is part of a broader program aimed at addressing young girls' needs, and includes sexuality education, anemia prevention, and improving reproductive health. This work is funded by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations.

For more information on this project contact:

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