

Improving the Reproductive Health of Married and Unmarried Youth in India

Delaying Age at Marriage in Rural Maharashtra, India

Adolescent girls are vulnerable to unique social and health risks that warrant special attention. Early marriage is one risk that persists in much of the developing world, including rural Maharashtra where the Institute for Health Management, Pachod (IHMP) is based. An extensive, community-based study from 1998-1999 found that the median age of marriage for girls in the Marathwada region, which includes Aurangabad district in rural Maharashtra, was alarmingly low 14.5 years.

IHMP studies have shown that young girls who lack educational opportunities are more likely to marry early a common situation in these communities where parents who want to protect their daughters often stop formal education for them because the school is outside their village. This IHMP research project, with support from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), sought to answer the question: Can life skills interventions effectively increase the age of marriage for girls? Initial results are promising.

Data and Methodology

Data were collected at baseline in 1998-1999, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. A quasi-experimental design was used to study the impact of the life skills intervention. For the first intervention in Aurangabad district, Maharashtra, 17 program and 18 control villages were compared. Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression was used to examine the effect of the intervention on age at marriage. Annual data on age at marriage since 1997 has been collected in the program and control villages to examine trends over time.

Key Results

Trends in age at marriage over time in program villages: The proportion of marriages to girls (ages 11 to 17) in the program area steadily decreased between 1997 and 2001, from 80.7 percent to 61.8 per cent, whereas no change occurred in the

control area. Similarly, the median age at marriage of young girls in the program area increased from 16 years in 1997-2000 to 17 years in 2001, whereas it remained unchanged in the control area. These findings are important because they represent all young girls in the program area and not just those who participated in the life skills course. This increase in the age at marriage and decline in proportions of early marriage suggest a change in the community norm of young girls' appropriate age at marriage.

Figure 1: Characteristics that Determine Girls' Age at Marriage

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
In control area (study area)	4.0**
14-17 yrs old (11-13 yrs)	3.9**
Not school-going (in-school)	2.9**
Working mother (non-working)	2.4*
N=358	

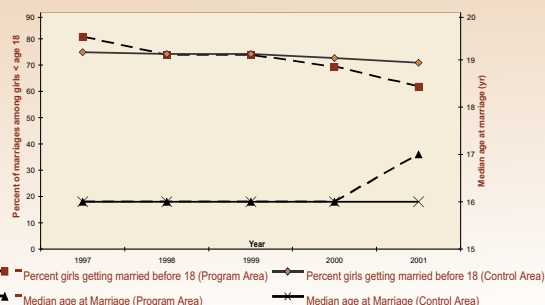
Note: Reference category in parentheses; logistic regression, also adjusted for girl's level of education, economic status, and mother's literacy; **p<.01; *p<.05

Source: IHMP-ICRW

Exposure to life skills intervention and attendance in life skills classes: A logistic regression analysis of determinants of age at marriage showed that, controlling for other background characteristics, girls who fully attended the life skills course were four times less likely to marry young (before 18) than those in the control villages. Within the study area (from a sample of 1,146 girls), only 9 percent of the girls who completed the course were married before 18, compared to almost one-third of the girls who never attended.



**Figure 2. IHMP Life Skills Program vs. Control Areas:
Percent of Marriages among Girls
<Age 18 and Median Age at Marriage**



Post-Project Developments:

- Since the project ended, the life skills course has been offered several more times to meet community demand, and enrollment has expanded to most of the eligible girls in Aurangabad district.

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- The course also was adapted to Pune city in Maharashtra and offered several times there.
- IHMP presented preliminary results of the program to the government of Maharashtra, which is considering adopting and adapting the life skills program throughout the state.

Delaying Age at Marriage in Rural Maharashtra, India (1998-1999)

Objectives: Delay age of marriage by a year in a rural setting by offering a year-long life skills course.

Structure: A one-year course, one hour each weekday evening, taught by a trained village woman with at least a seventh-grade education. A total of 225 one-hour sessions, divided into five sections: social issues and institutions; local bodies; life skills; child health and nutrition; and health; girls also conducted community service. IHMP held monthly meetings for parents.

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

About IHMP and ICRW's Adolescent Reproductive Health Program in India

The Institute for Health Management, Pachod (IHMP) is based in Pachod, rural Aurangabad district, Maharashtra, India, with an office in Pune city. The life skills program started in rural Aurangabad, and expanded to Pune city slums. IHMP's life skills program, funded by the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation, was part of a broader multi-partner program, led by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), aimed at improving girls' reproductive health. That research program, the Adolescent Reproductive Health Program in India, was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.