

Reproductive coercion, i.e. behaviors that reduce a woman's control over her reproductive decisions, can include behaviors that can range from pressure from a marital partner or their family on a woman to bear children when she does not want to; to sabotaging, destroying or removing contraception; to marital rape; to intimate partner violence for the purpose of influencing a woman's child bearing decisions. Relatedly, the practice of child marriage contributes to several of the consequences of reproductive coercion, including early initiation of sexual activity; higher rates of intimate partner violence, early childbirth, and maternal mortality and morbidity; as well as higher total fertility (MacQuarrie, Nahar, Khan, & Sultana, 2016; Mathur, Greene, & Malhotra, 2003; Wodon et al., 2017). However, to date the literature has not extensively explored the specific ways that child marriage shapes reproductive coercion, and vice versa. This is a key gap, since understanding how reproductive coercion and child marriage intersect (and how they do so differently within different cultures) is key in designing effective support systems for women who marry as children.

PURPOSE

Qualitative data from Nepal in a recent study on the economic impacts of child marriage conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), the World Bank, and the Center for Research on Environment, Health and Population Activities (CREHPA) highlight the importance of understanding the interplay of reproductive coercion and child marriage in different cultural settings.¹ In a series of interviews, women married as children in two districts in Nepal described the lived costs of child marriage on their lives in more than economic terms, particularly focusing on the devastating effect that reproductive coercion has had on their health and lives.

Nepal is a particularly apt site for this work, as the intense cultural variation between different districts allows researchers to explore how the dynamics governing the interaction of reproductive coercion and child marriage vary in different settings. Overall, Nepal has the third

highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia, with 48.5 percent of women aged 20-49 having married before age 18, and 24.5 percent of girls aged 15-19 currently married (UNFPA Nepal, 2017). The two districts in this study, Rautahat and Baitadi, both have high rates of child marriage. Rautahat, a plains district bordering the Indian state of Bihar, is characterized by groups with religious and linguistic variation that nevertheless share some cultural practices such as high dowry, which can include cash, goods such as furniture, vehicles, or household appliances and sometimes land. Baitadi is located in the hills on Nepal's western border and is characterized by a high prevalence of the Brahmin/Chettri ethnic group, a limited practice of dowry and high seasonal migration to India. In these varied settings, the researchers found both consistencies and divergences between how reproductive coercion manifested among women married as children.

¹In this brief, we highlight findings related to reproductive coercion encountered by women who were married as children in two districts of Nepal. This is part of a broader study on child marriage in Nepal, the results of which are pending publication.

METHODOLOGY

In 2016, ICRW and CREHPA conducted and analyzed a series of 35 in-depth interviews with women who had married as children in the two districts. The interviews were conducted in Nepali by researchers from CREHPA. Participants were asked to describe events related to their childhood, their experience with the process of getting married and their experiences within marriage, including their relationships with their husbands and family. These interviews were transcribed and translated into English, and a team of researchers from ICRW analyzed the transcripts using a coding structure developed based on the original research questions in addition to themes and topics that emerged during the interviews. Inter-coder reliability was conducted prior to full coding of transcripts. Additions of new codes or changes in code definitions were determined via consensus among the research team and used to develop a final coding structure.

FINDINGS

While women in both districts reported experiencing reproductive coercion, it was more often described by women in Rautahat than in Baitadi. Only one of the 17 women interviewed in Rautahat did not report some form of reproductive coercion. The reasons for this difference are unclear, but it may result from gender norms that allow greater amounts of intimate partner violence both generally and for the express purpose of coercing a wife to bear sons. As one respondent reports:

I have six daughters. I do not have any son. So, my husband, father-in-law and the society treat me poorly ... When this small daughter (pointing towards a small baby in her lap) was born, he [her husband] did not give me enough to eat for a full stomach. He always scolds me saying why did I give birth to only daughters? He beats me a lot, he threatens to throw me out of the house and he uses foul words to me (Rautahat woman, illiterate, age 26, marital age 14, 6 living children).



While pressure to have a son and intimate partner violence occurred in both regions, women in Rautahat reported both more often than women in Baitadi. Gender norms in both regions devalued women and girls. In Rautahat, this took the form of more intimate partner violence and fewer educational opportunities for girls, which may have further reduced their ability to resist pressure to bear children.

Relatedly, **in Rautahat, women reported that their marital families placed strict limits on their mobility until they had given birth to children.** One respondent notes:

[My mother in law] tells me, you don't need to go outside, you don't have any children, why do you need to go out? You don't need to go outside nor do you have to do any work outside of house, you will only get to go out after you have babies (Rautahat woman, illiterate, age 21, marital age 12, no living children)

Another respondent said that this was common in their region, explaining:

In our community, daughters-in-law aren't allowed to go outside till they give birth to 1-2 children. We had to stay inside our house the entire time. We cannot speak to anyone, we cannot say about the food we want to eat and we just stay alone inside our room. We have to cook food, clean utensils, clean our house and take care of in-laws (Rautahat woman, grade 3 education, age 21, marital age 16, 3 living children).

This respondent clearly linked reproductive coercion to her limited mobility, and in fact may respondents described being forced to conduct household labors and gaining increased mobility only as they aged and had more children.

Regardless of their cultural background, women in both regions experienced pressure from their mothers-in-law to prove their fertility and to bear sons. Even when husbands were initially supportive of delaying child bearing, pressure from their mothers could shift their views and lead them to put pressure on their wives. One respondent from Baitadi says:

It had just been a year and people had started saying things. My mother-in-law used to say I was unable to give birth and she would find another girl for my husband to get married and have a child. She used to tell me I should not be in the house. My husband had already said then that we were in school and studying and we would not have any child so early. But later on, he started saying that people had started talking and a child is needed. Later we didn't use anything and I gave birth to my son. (Baitadi woman, Grade 9 Education age 21, marital age 15, 1 living child).

It should be noted that the threat here, that the man should divorce his wife and marry another woman if she could not give birth, would leave a woman destitute. The psychological pressure of this is a key element of reproductive coercion.



CONCLUSION

The restrictions on mobility experienced by women in Rautahat has not been extensively recognized as a form of reproductive coercion in the literature. Given cultural similarities between Rautahat and the neighboring Indian state of Bihar, recognizing this form of reproductive coercion might have widespread implications for programming to improve women's reproductive control in multiple countries in South Asia. There has been limited recognition of the role that non-spouses, particularly mothers-in-law, play in reproductive coercion (Grace & Fleming, 2016; MacQuarrie, Nahar, Khan, & Sultana, 2016). The research presented here reinforces that it is a major factor to consider when developing approaches to combat reproductive coercion.

This study highlights the importance of understanding different forms of reproductive coercion as subnational levels, which will be key in developing further programming in both regions. Given the similarities between Rautahat, Bihar and other parts of India, implications from these findings could echo well beyond Nepal. Understanding how these norms and other factors relate to reproductive coercion and child marriage both in these two districts and beyond will help in creating effective strategies both to reducing the burdens faced by women who are still marrying as children and to ending child marriage in Nepal and the rest of South Asia.



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