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Early Marriage Among Under-19 Girls: A Mixed-Methods Study

Rajdip Mandal

rajdip296@gmail.com

All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Kolkata https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2528-9671

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Abstract

Background:
Early marriage among girls under 19 years remains a significant public health and social concern in the Sundarbans of West Bengal, India. Despite legal restrictions, the practice continues due to socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and gender inequality.

Objectives:
To assess the sociodemographic characteristics of girls married before the age of 19 years and to explore their opinions regarding early marriage.

Methods:
A mixed-methods study employing a convergent parallel design was conducted among 20 girls married before the age of 19 years. Quantitative sociodemographic data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative insights were generated through two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings were integrated using a joint analysis approach to examine convergence, divergence, and complementarity across data strands.

Results:
Quantitative findings: Most participants were aged 16–18 years (80%), with 90% living with their husbands. A majority were housewives (60%), while others were engaged in daily work or farming. Half had secondary education (50%), while 15% had no formal education. Most participants had no children (65%).

Qualitative findings: Early marriage was socially accepted and influenced by family pressure and limited autonomy. Although participants preferred marriage after valued education, early marriage often resulted in school discontinuation. Girls reported a lack of readiness for marital responsibilities and economic dependency. However, many expressed a desire to delay marriage and continue education.

Conclusion:
Early marriage persists due to entrenched socio-cultural and economic factors despite awareness of its adverse effects. Strengthening education, empowerment, and community awareness is essential to delaying the age of marriage.

INTRODUCTION

Early marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18 years, remains a major global public health and human rights issue. It disproportionately affects adolescent girls and is associated with adverse outcomes such as early pregnancy, maternal health risks, school

dropout, and reduced autonomy**[1].** Despite global commitments, child marriage continues to be highly prevalent in low and middle-income countries, particularly in South Asia **[2]**.

In India, early marriage remains a persistent concern despite legal measures such as the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. Socio-cultural norms, poverty, gender inequality, limited access to education, and concerns related to family honour and safety contribute significantly to the continuation of this practice **[3].** National evidence from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) indicates that a considerable proportion of women aged 20–24 years were married before the age of 18 years, highlighting the ongoing burden of early marriage in India **[4].**

The Sundarbans region of West Bengal represents a particularly vulnerable setting due to its geographical isolation, economic instability, and limited access to health and educational services. In such hard-to-reach areas, early marriage is often normalized and reinforced by traditional beliefs and community expectations. These structural vulnerabilities are further intensified by climate-related disruptions, which have significantly affected livelihoods in the region. Climate-induced disasters have contributed to high levels of economic insecurity, including irregular income among affected households, thereby increasing the risk of child labour, trafficking, and early marriage as coping mechanisms**[5,6,7]**

However, there is limited qualitative evidence exploring the lived opinions of girls married before 19 years in this context. Understanding the sociodemographic characteristics and opinions of girls married before the age of 19 years is essential for designing context-specific interventions. Therefore, this study aims to assess the sociodemographic profile of under-19 married girls and to explore their opinions regarding early marriage in a selected community development block of the Sundarbans, West Bengal, India.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Approach

This study was conducted as an observational cross-sectional study using a mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analysed independently, and integrated through joint analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of early marriage among girls under 19 years.

Study Area and Period:

The study was carried out in a selected Community Development Block of the Sundarbans region, West Bengal, India, comprising 10 Gram Panchayats. The area is characterized by socio-economic vulnerability and a higher prevalence of early marriage practices.

The study was conducted over a period of three months, from January 2026 to March 2026.

Study Population:

The study population consisted of girls who were married before the age of 19 years and were residing across all 10 Gram Panchayats of the selected block during the study period.

Eligibility Criteria:

Inclusion Criteria: Girls married before 19 years of age. Residents of the selected Gram Panchayats.Willing to participate

Exclusion Criteria: Participants unavailable during the data collection period.Those who did not provide informed consent

Sample Size and Sampling Technique: A total of 20 participants were included in the study. A simple random sampling technique was employed. Eligible participants were identified from all 10 Gram Panchayats, and participants were randomly selected to ensure representation from the entire study area.

Data Collection Methods:

Quantitative Component:

Quantitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a predesigned and pretested structured schedule. Information on socio-demographic variables such as age, education, occupation, marital status, religion, and number of children was obtained.

Qualitative Component:

Qualitative data were collected using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). A total of two FGDs were conducted among girls married before 19 years. Each FGD was guided by a semi-structured discussion guide to explore participant’s opinions regarding early marriage.

Study Variables: Quantitative Variables: Age, education, occupation, marital status, religion, and number of children**.**Qualitative Variable: Opinions regarding early marriage

Operational Definition of Opinion: “Opinion” refers to the views, perceptions, attitudes, and experiences expressed by participants regarding early marriage.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative Analysis:

Quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel 2025 and JAMOVI (version 2.6.17). Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage were calculated and presented using tables and graphical formats.

Qualitative Analysis:

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis with the help of Taguette (open-source qualitative data analysis software). Transcripts were coded and organized into themes. The colour coding technique was used to indicate themes during joint analysis.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data (Joint Analysis):

Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated through a joint analysis approach to identify complementarity between findings. This helped in strengthening interpretation and providing a deeper understanding of the issue.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical standards were adhered to throughout the study. Administrative and ethical support for conducting the research was obtained from the “Old Women, Child and Underdevelopment Progress Society” (Memo No.: OWCUPS/2L/2025/RE/0912 dated 15 December 2025).

As all participants were under 19 years of age, written informed consent was obtained from their parents or legal guardians, along with assent from the participants themselves, before data collection.

Prior permission was also obtained from the relevant local governing bodies and community leaders before initiating field activities.

All procedures were conducted in accordance with accepted ethical principles for human subject research. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed at any stage of the study.

RESULTS

Results: Quantitative

Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of sociodemographic characteristics of under-19 girls (n = 20). With respect to age, the majority of under-19 girls were in the 16–18 years age group, comprising 16 individuals (80%), while 4 (20%) were in the 13–15 years age group.

Regarding marital status, most under-19 girls were living with their husbands, accounting for 18 (90%), whereas 2 (10%) were divorced.

In terms of occupation, more than half of the under-19 girls were housewives (n = 12, 60%). The remaining were engaged in other occupations, including daily wage work (n = 4, 20%), farming (n = 3, 15%), and merchant activities (n = 1, 5%).

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Sociodemographic Characteristics of Under-19 Girls (n=20)

Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Age		
13-15	4	20
16-18	16	80
Marital status		
Living with Husband	18	90
Divorced	2	10
Occupation		
Housewife	12	60
Farmer	3	15
Merchant	1	5
Daily worker	4	20
Education level		
No formal education	3	15
Primary School(1–4)	2	10
Secondary School(5-10)	10	50
High School (11–12)	5	25
Religion		
Hindu	7	35
Muslim	12	60
Christian	1	5
Number of children		
0	13	65
1	6	30
2–3	1	5

The educational status showed that half of the under-19 girls had completed secondary education (classes 5–10), representing 10 (50%). Additionally, 5 (25%) had attained high

school education (classes 11–12). A smaller proportion had no formal education (n = 3, 15%) or had completed primary education (classes 1–4) (n = 2, 10%).

With respect to religion, the majority of under-19 girls were Muslim (n = 12, 60%), followed by Hindu (n = 7, 35%) and Christian (n = 1, 5%).

Regarding the number of children, most under-19 girls had no children (n = 13, 65%), while 6 (30%) had one child, and only 1 (5%) had two to three children.

Overall, the findings indicate that the study population of under-19 girls was predominantly in the 16–18 years age group, living with their husbands, mainly housewives, with secondary level education, largely belonging to the Muslim community, and mostly without children.

Results: Qualitative

The findings from the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted among under-19 girls (n = 20, two groups of 10 participants each) revealed several consistent themes regarding opinions on early marriage.

Early marriage was widely perceived as a socially and culturally accepted practice within the community. Participants from both groups indicated that early marriage is common and expected, with strong societal pressure to conform. Statements such as “everyone follows this practice” and “people expect girls to marry early” reflect the normalization of early marriage and the influence of community expectations.

Family pressure and lack of autonomy emerged as significant factors influencing early marriage. Participants reported that decisions regarding marriage are primarily made by parents and relatives, often without considering the girls’ preferences. Many expressed that they had little or no choice in the matter, highlighting limited decision-making power and the dominance of family authority in marital decisions.

Table 2:FGD Findings – Group 1 (n = 10),Opinions on Early Marriage (Under-19 Girls)

Theme	Participant Quotes	Interpretation
1: Social norms and cultural acceptance	“Early marriage is common in our village.” “Everyone follows this practice.” “People will talk if a girl is not married early.”	Early marriage is culturally accepted and normalized within the community.
2: Family pressure and lack of autonomy	“It is not good, but we have to follow family decisions.” “My parents decided everything.” “I had no choice.” “Girls cannot go against their family.”	Girls have limited decision-making power and are expected to comply with family decisions.
3:Preferred age and education linkage	“Girls should marry after 18.” “Better after completing studies.” “First education, then marriage.” “If we study more, we can marry later.”	Participants prefer marriage after the legal age and associate it with the completion of education.
4:Educational disruption	“After marriage, I had to stop school.” “It is difficult to study after marriage.” “My studies ended after marriage.” “I wanted to continue school but couldn’t.”	Early marriage interrupts education and limits future opportunities.
5:Marital unpreparedness	“Too many responsibilities at a young age.” “We are not mentally ready.” “Marriage brings pressure.” “I feel stressed handling household work.”	Early marriage leads to psychological stress and a lack of readiness for marital roles.
6:Economic dependency	“After marriage, I became a housewife.” “I could not work outside.” “I depend on my husband for everything.” “I wanted to earn, but I had no opportunity.”	Early marriage restricts employment opportunities, leading to financial dependence.
7:Love marriage and elopement	“Some girls run away to marry their partner.” “Parents don’t agree, so they elope.” “They fear forced marriage at home.” “Love marriage is not accepted in families.”	Some early marriages occur due to romantic relationships and a lack of parental acceptance.
8:Early motherhood challenges	“Having a child early is very difficult.” “It is hard to take care of a baby at this age.” “We are not ready to become mothers.”	Early pregnancy is perceived as physically and emotionally burdensome.
9:Aspiration for delayed marriage	“Girls should study first.” “Marriage should be delayed.” “We want to become something before marriage.” “Early marriage should be stopped.”	There is strong support among girls for delaying marriage and prioritizing education.

Despite the prevalence of early marriage, participants expressed a clear preference for delayed marriage. Under-19 girls in both groups emphasized the importance of completing education before marriage, suggesting that marriage should occur after 18 years or even after 20 years. This indicates an awareness of legal age norms and a desire to prioritize education prior to entering marital life.

Educational disruption was a prominent consequence of early marriage. Participants reported that marriage often leads to discontinuation of schooling, with many unable to continue their studies after marriage. Both groups consistently highlighted that early marriage restricts educational attainment and limits future opportunities.

Table 3: FGD Findings – Group 1 (n = 10), Opinions on Early Marriage (Under-19 Girls)

Theme	Participant Quotes	Interpretation
1: Social norms and cultural acceptance	“It is a tradition in our community.” “Everyone follows this custom.” “People expect girls to marry early.”	Early marriage is culturally accepted and sustained by community expectations.
2: Family pressure and lack of autonomy	“Sometimes it is forced.” “Parents and relatives decide.” “Girls are not asked about their choice.”	Girls have limited autonomy, with family and relatives playing a dominant role in decision-making.
3:Preferred age and education linkage	“After 20 is better.” “First education, then marriage.” “Girls should complete their studies before marriage.”	Participants prefer delayed marriage and emphasize education as a priority.
4:Educational disruption	“Girls cannot continue their studies after marriage.” “Education stops once a girl is married.” “Many girls drop out after marriage.”	Early marriage interrupts education and limits future opportunities.
5:Marital unpreparedness	“Life becomes difficult after marriage.” “There is a lot of responsibility.” “Girls are not ready for such roles.”	Early marriage leads to increased responsibilities and a lack of mental preparedness.
6:Economic dependency	“We stay at home and do household work.” “Girls cannot work after marriage.” “They depend on family income.”	Early marriage restricts employment opportunities and leads to financial dependence.
7:Love marriage and elopement	“Some girls marry by their own choice.” “They leave home if parents do not agree.” “Love marriage is not accepted easily.”	Some early marriages occur due to romantic relationships and a lack of parental acceptance.
8:Early motherhood challenges	“Early childbearing is risky.” “Young girls face health problems.” “It is difficult to manage a child at this age.”	Early pregnancy is associated with health risks and physical burden.
9:Aspiration for delayed marriage	“Awareness should be increased.” “Girls should be empowered.” “Marriage should happen later.”	Participants support delaying marriage and promoting education and empowerment.

Marital unpreparedness was another key theme identified. Under-19 girls described experiencing significant psychological stress and difficulty managing responsibilities after marriage. They expressed that they were not mentally prepared for marital roles, with increased household responsibilities contributing to feelings of pressure and stress.

Economic dependency was also commonly reported. Participants indicated that early marriage restricts their ability to engage in income-generating activities, resulting in

financial dependence on husbands or family members. Many expressed a desire to work and earn but reported lack of opportunities following marriage.

The theme of love marriage and elopement was observed in both groups. Some participants reported that early marriages occur due to romantic relationships, especially when such relationships are not accepted by families. In such cases, girls may elope to marry their partners, indicating a conflict between personal choice and societal norms.

Early motherhood challenges were highlighted as a major concern. Participants described early childbearing as physically and emotionally difficult, with increased health risks and challenges in managing childcare at a young age. Many expressed that they were not ready to take on maternal responsibilities.

Finally, there was a strong aspiration for delayed marriage among participants. Under-19 girls emphasized the importance of education, empowerment, and awareness in preventing early marriage. They expressed a desire to achieve personal goals before marriage and supported the idea that marriage should occur at a later stage in life.

Overall, the qualitative findings demonstrate that while early marriage remains culturally embedded and influenced by family pressure, under-19 girls increasingly recognize its negative consequences and express a clear preference for delaying marriage and prioritizing education and personal development.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings: (QUAN+QUAL)

DISCUSSION

This study provides a clearer picture of early marriage among under-19 girls by combining both quantitative and qualitative findings. The results show that most girls were in the 16–18 years age group and already living with their husbands, which indicates that marriage is still occurring before the legal age. This reflects the continued presence of early marriage as a social reality in many communities, where marriage before 18 years remains common despite legal restrictions **[8]**.

Education emerged as an important but vulnerable area in this study. Although many girls had reached secondary or even higher levels of schooling, the qualitative findings clearly showed that marriage often interrupts education. Several participants mentioned that they had to discontinue their studies after marriage, which limited their future opportunities. Similar patterns have been reported in other studies, where early marriage is strongly associated with school dropout and reduced chances of personal development **[7,9,10]**. This shows that access to education alone is not sufficient if early marriage continues to occur.

The findings also highlight the strong role of social and cultural norms. Early marriage was widely described as a normal practice, with participants expressing that “everyone follows this.” This reflects how deeply rooted the practice is within the community. Previous research also shows that early marriage is sustained by long-standing traditions and social expectations, where families tend to follow what is socially accepted rather than what is legally prescribed **[7,10–12]**. Such normalization makes it difficult to challenge the practice.

Family pressure and limited autonomy were strongly evident in this study. Most girls reported that decisions about marriage were taken by parents or relatives, with little or no involvement from them. This reflects a broader issue of gender inequality, where girls have limited control over their own lives. Studies from similar contexts have also highlighted that early marriage is often driven by family authority and restricted decision-making power among girls **[11–13]**. The findings of this study clearly support this pattern.

At the same time, an important observation is the gap between practice and preference. Even though early marriage is common, many girls expressed a desire to marry later, preferably after completing their education. This indicates that awareness is increasing among young girls. Other studies have also found that girls are aware of the negative consequences of early marriage but are unable to delay it due to social and family pressures **[12,14]**. This gap between awareness and actual decision-making highlights the need for stronger support systems.

Economic dependency is another key issue identified in this study. Most participants were housewives, and many reported that marriage reduced their chances of working or earning. As a result, they became financially dependent on their husbands or families. This finding is consistent with earlier research, which shows that early marriage limits women’s economic participation and reduces their financial independence **[13–15]**.

The study also highlights the challenges faced after marriage. Many girls described feeling mentally unprepared for marital responsibilities. They reported stress due to household work and expectations. Early motherhood was also seen as difficult, both physically and emotionally. Existing evidence suggests that early marriage is associated with increased health risks, psychological stress, and complications related to pregnancy and childbirth at a young age **[14–16]**. This shows that early marriage affects multiple dimensions of well-being.

Another important aspect is the role of love marriage and elopement. Some participants mentioned that early marriage occurred due to romantic relationships, especially when families did not approve. This indicates that early marriage is not always forced but can also result from personal choices within restrictive environments. Similar findings have

been reported in other qualitative studies, highlighting the complex nature of early marriage decisions [15,17].

The findings also reflect broader socio-economic conditions. In many cases, early marriage is influenced by poverty and limited opportunities. Families may consider marriage as a way to reduce economic burden or provide security for girls. Previous research has shown that financial hardship and lack of resources are important factors contributing to early marriage [16–18].

Gender inequality remains a central issue. The limited decision-making power observed in this study reflects deeply rooted gender norms, where girls are expected to prioritize domestic roles over education and personal development. Studies have consistently shown that early marriage is closely linked to unequal gender roles and expectations within society [17–19].

Community-level influence is also significant. In settings where early marriage is widely practiced, families often feel pressure to follow the same pattern. Even if individuals are aware of its negative effects, they conform to social expectations. Similar findings have been reported in other studies, where community norms play a major role in shaping marriage practices [18–20].

The long-term consequences of early marriage are also important. Research shows that early marriage affects not only immediate outcomes but also long-term well-being, including education, health, and life satisfaction. Women who marry early often continue to face disadvantages later in life [19,21]. This highlights that early marriage is not just a short-term issue but has lasting impacts.

Educational discontinuation, as seen in this study, is widely recognized as one of the major consequences of early marriage. Once girls leave school due to marriage, they rarely return, which limits their future opportunities. Studies have identified early marriage as one of the key reasons for school dropout among girls [20–22].

Early motherhood further adds to the burden. Girls who marry early are more likely to have children at a young age, which affects both maternal and child health. This creates a cycle of disadvantage that can continue across generations. Similar concerns have been highlighted in previous research on early childbearing [21,23].

Addressing early marriage requires more than awareness alone. Research suggests that effective interventions need to combine education, economic support, and community engagement. Programs that involve families and communities tend to be more successful in reducing early marriage [22,24]. This is particularly relevant in this study, where girls were aware of the issue but lacked the power to act.

Finally, the findings emphasize the importance of empowering girls. Education, skill development, and awareness can help girls make informed decisions and delay marriage. Evidence shows that when girls are supported and empowered, the likelihood of early marriage decreases significantly [24]. The aspirations expressed by participants in this study clearly reflect this need.

LIMITATION :

This study has several limitations that should be considered while interpreting the findings. Being a cross-sectional study, it captures information at a single point in time and does not establish causal relationships. The study was conducted in selected Gram Panchayats within a specific block, which limits the generalizability of the results to wider populations. The use of self-reported data may have introduced recall and social desirability bias, particularly on sensitive issues such as early marriage, autonomy, and family pressure. Additionally, the relatively small and localized sample size, along with the short study period, may have restricted the depth of exploration. As the qualitative findings rely on the researcher's interpretation, there is also a possibility of subjective bias.

CONCLUSION

Early marriage among adolescent girls is a multifaceted issue driven by entrenched socio-cultural norms, gender inequality, and limited autonomy of girls within family structures. The practice persists not merely as a tradition but as a socially reinforced expectation, often overriding individual choice and rights.

The findings indicate that early marriage significantly compromises girl’s overall development by restricting educational attainment, limiting economic independence, and exposing them to early marital and reproductive responsibilities for which they are often unprepared. These conditions reinforce cycles of dependency, vulnerability, and intergenerational disadvantage.

At the same time, the expressed aspirations of girls to pursue education and delay marriage reflect a critical window of opportunity for intervention. This suggests that, despite structural constraints, there is growing awareness and willingness among adolescents to challenge existing norms.

Therefore, addressing early marriage requires integrated, context-specific strategies that go beyond individual-level change to target family, community, and systemic factors. Strengthening girl’s education, enhancing decision-making autonomy, and transforming societal attitudes are essential to achieving sustainable change and improving the long-term well-being of under-19 girls.

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Tables

Table 4 and 5 are available in the Supplementary Files section.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- Table4.docx
- Table5.docx