

Delaying marriage in developing countries benefits children

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Credit: Biswarup Ganguly

Delaying the marriage age of young women in parts of the developing world has significant positive effects for their children, a new study shows.

The research, conducted by academics at the University of Sussex, in collaboration with researchers at the University of Washington at Seattle and the World Bank, looked at data from tens of thousands of households across India.

It uncovers that [children](#) of [women](#) who get married later are more likely

to complete their required vaccinations, have a higher weight-for-height, are more likely to enrol at school and attain better grades.

Underage [marriage](#) is prevalent in India; though the legal minimum age of marriage is 18, over 50 per cent of women in the study reported being married at a younger age. The practice is not just specific to India, but is common within many parts of the developing world.

The paper, published in the *Journal of Development Economics*, looks at more than 32,000 women, aged 15-40, living in both rural and urban households across India. Previous studies have highlighted the health risks of early childbirth, for both mother and child; others have focussed on its effects on the child's education. Uniquely, this investigation looks at a much broader range of indicators of child wellbeing and attempts to find out why marriage age in itself has such profound effects.

Among its findings, the study shows that children of women who delay marriage by one year are:

- 4.6 per cent more likely to complete their required vaccinations
- 3.1 per cent more likely to enrol at school
- Achieve 2.3 per cent better grades in reading, and 3 per cent better in maths.

To further shed light on why they observe these effects, the authors zoom in on a special set of women, the "child brides" – these are the women who are engaged to be married before they reach puberty. They find that the children of the non-educated "child brides", in particular, suffer the most negative effects to their wellbeing. The fact that these children are affected indicates that the age at marriage in and by itself matters.

Dr Annemie Maertens of the University of Sussex elaborates: "What our

study is saying is that delaying marriage not only improves the mother's educational attainment or changes the kind of husband she marries.

There's also a direct [effect](#): because she's getting married earlier, she has different preferences, less health knowledge, possibly lower bargaining power and gives birth to more children.

"It's not enough to just work on the educational aspect: minimum age laws need to become enforced."

India's Prohibition of Child Marriage Act is clearly not being observed or enforced successfully, the researchers argue. The country's cultural acceptance of [child marriage](#) might play a role and, hence, in addition to better enforcement, the study suggests that incentive schemes – such as the "Our daughters, our wealth" program in Haryana, India – could offer a solution. Dr Maertens says: "There are a couple of small-scale pilot programs that have been quite successful, which give a financial reward to parents of unmarried 18-year-old girls, and our paper is in support of those programs.

"In the absence of social norms, which have not been changed, and in the absence of the ability to enforce laws, you might want to consider other incentives."

More information: A.V. Chari et al. The causal effect of maternal age at marriage on child wellbeing: Evidence from India, *Journal of Development Economics* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jdeveco.2017.02.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2017.02.002)

Provided by University of Sussex

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