

# **Dynamics of Early Marriage of Girls among Meos of Mewat, Haryana**

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## ***Abstract***

The prevalence of the early marriage of girls has been widely documented in many communities across the world. Although the detrimental effects of this practice have been highlighted, the actual propelling factors and opinions as well as experiences of the women who married young have not received much attention. This paper presents a qualitative phenomenological analysis, carried out through semi structured interviews with 15 Meo women from rural Mewat, Haryana, India, who had an early marriage. An attempt was made to capture their lived experiences through dominant shared themes, which were identified following an idiographic approach and analysed using a social constructionist framework. The narratives clearly indicated normalisation and internalisation of socially and culturally created gendered norms by the women. In light of the limited options available to pubescent girls owing to a lack of educational and vocational opportunities and limited autonomy in a patriarchal setup, they had entered early matrimony without anticipating the future deleterious health consequences. This calls for focused, culturally sensitive, community level interventions for mobilising people against this practice as well as rendering support to empower the already married young women.

## ***Keywords***

marriage, Mewat, Meo-Muslim, adolescent girls, gender, Haryana

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## **Introduction**

The early marriage of girls is an insidious practice followed in many communities across the world. It has been defined as the marriage solemnised before or during adolescence (Somerset, 2000) or a marital

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union involving children below the age of 18 years (UNICEF, 2006). It is estimated that in developing nations, chiefly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 56 per cent of women aged 20-49 years had been married before the age of 18 years (UNICEF, 2014). In the case of India, even though the prevalence of child marriage has declined nationally over a decade, from 47.4 per cent in 2006 to 26.8 per cent in 2016 (IIPS, 2012-13), regional disparities continue to exist and the rate of change has been quite slow, particularly for adolescent girls in the 15-18-year age group. A number of legal provisions exist in the country to prevent early marriage, such as the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) which considers child marriage as a non-cognizable and non-bailable offence; the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000; the Domestic Violence Act, 2005; and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012. Despite rigorous laws, the practice is profound and pervasive across several parts of the country, most notably in rural areas (Sagade, 2005).

A plethora of interwoven factors have been identified leading to the existence and continuance of the phenomenon of early marriage. It is deeply rooted and grounded in cultural values, traditionalist social structures, socio-economic backwardness, patriarchy, low authority along with lack of decision making power in girls and insecurity in the face of conflict (Malhotra et al., 2011; Matlabi et al., 2013; UNICEF, 2001). The International Council for Research on Women (ICRW, 2007) noted that early marriage is presumably common in underprivileged girls such as those from poor rural families and have little education. In concurring, Manganara (2016) emphasised familial socio-economic status including parents' educational and financial level while Gupta and Jain (2008) also attributed male dominance, parental ignorance and social forces as the prime determinants of early marriage. Further, Agege et al. (2017) asserted that all these diverse causes of early marriage are yet to be exhaustively explored and discussed.

It is indisputable that early marriage is a critical issue that undermines progress towards developmental goals. It fatally compromises the overall health and development of individuals, families, communities and countries. Burns (1998) pointed out that it results in multiple social, health and economic problems including elevated birth rates, poverty and malnutrition, high illiteracy, infant mortality, and low life expectancy, especially among rural women. According to UNICEF (2001), marriage at a young age has profound physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional impacts on both boys and girls. It has been acknowledged to have

overwhelming effects particularly on girls, denying them right to education, health, sustainable livelihoods and quality of life, thereby enhancing their vulnerability. Higher rates of reproductive health related problems, unplanned pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion and delivery of pre term or low birth weight babies have been found to be strongly correlated with early marriage. Miller and Lester (2003) observed that the first-time mothers below the age of 16 face an elevated risk of maternal and infant mortality in addition to the normal risks and responsibilities of childbearing. In accord, Khan et al. (2009) observed that this practice has deleterious consequences for the children born to teenage mothers. Additionally, Haberland et al. (2004) noted that early sexual activity consequent to early marriage amplifies the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS in these adolescents. Other than these physical health repercussions, the adverse psychological effects such as an increased probability of experiencing depression, anxiety and other mood disorders have been noted by Gupta and Jain (2008), alongside an increased possibility of physical and sexual intimate partner violence (Mehra and Agrawal, 2004).

It is apparent that early marriage is a gross violation of the human rights of children and adolescents. However, it has remained a culturally and socially sanctioned, collective practice across several rural communities. The gendered impact of this phenomenon with respect to a significant change in a girl's quality of life cannot be ignored. In this light, as a primary step towards the eradication of this negative cultural practice, it is imperative to understand how the early marriage of adolescent girls is construed in a particular community, the reasons behind its continuance and its effects from the perspective of girls or women who themselves were married as children. The paper seeks to echo the voices of affected women pertaining to the context of their marriage and perceived impact.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Through a review of literature, it was discerned that the complex nature of the phenomenon of early marriage can be explained through an overarching feminist theory on the social construction of gender. This theory identifies gender as a pervasive social construct that determines the distribution of power, privileges, and economic resources between men and women. This notion of social construction of gender perceives society as the basis for gender identity as against the biological sex difference (Anderson et al., 2005). It thus considers gendered norms and expectations to be socially

and culturally created. These gender differences can be observed in the division of labour in the family, typecasting of occupations at work, approval of accepted gendered behaviour and appearance, and disapproval of deviations from the established norms. This theory further posits that social institutions like religion, education, mass media and law reinforce these inequalities and curb any variations through moral or legal condemnation and stigmatising.

The phenomenon of early marriage is also governed by the role and status of women in a society, particularly in cultures where traditional norms and values keep on reproducing unequal gender structures. There are general social expectations of gender roles and identity that put pressure on young girls to behave in a certain way. It has been acknowledged that within the context of a patriarchal family ideology, girls are reared to be obedient, self-sacrificing, modest, nurturing, hardworking and home loving, and by marrying young girls, the male superiority and hierarchy is best preserved (Seymour, 1999). It may even be so that the girls or women are oblivious to being treated unequally or may intentionally show normative conformity. In this light, a social constructionist framework was considered appropriate to illustrate how a group of women, who married young in a particular social context, construct discourses about the phenomena of early marriage.

### **Study Setting, Data and Methods**

The research for this paper was undertaken with women from the Meo community of the Mewat district in Southeast Haryana. Mewat has been identified and lately tagged as the most backward district of the country, faring badly in almost all the development indicators like education, health and governance (*The Times of India*, 28 March 2018). According to the Census of India, Haryana, the district is primarily rural, thriving on an agrarian economy, with a predominant Meo-Muslim population (70.9%) and a significantly low female literacy rate (36.6%). The Meo community is unique in the sense that although they profess the beliefs of Islam, the roots of their ethnic structure are similar to the Hindu caste society. The community shows a fusion of customs and practices of both, Hindus and Muslims (Mayaram, 1997). The District Level Household and Facility Survey DLHS-4 data for rural Mewat, showed that for the reference period of 2012-13, 39.8 per cent of the women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 18. It further revealed that 7.1 per cent of the total child births were by women aged 15-19 years and 70.1 per cent of adolescent girls in the same age group, had moderate to severe anaemia, which furthers the risk associated with early pregnancy and childbirth (IIPS, 2012-13).

Polit and Beck (2010) agreed that a qualitative research design is appropriate to explore the perceptions of individuals and social groups within the context of their culture, history, and personal experiences. Thus a qualitative phenomenological approach was used to explore the dynamics underlying the practice of early marriage in the community, based on women's own perceptions, subjective viewpoints, values and life experiences. The researcher's preconceptions were consciously bracketed to enable a nuanced understanding of this practice in the context of the women who had been living through the situation.

The researcher visited various villages in the study area, with the help of the Sehgal Foundation, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) working in the region. A purposive, opportunistic sampling method was used to recruit 15 women participants who were of the reproductive age group of 15-49 years, married before they turned 18 years of age, had at least one conception/child birth and were willing to share information about their lived experiences. The field workers of the NGO coordinated the time and place for the interviews based on the participants' convenience. The selected women were informed about the purpose of the study, and verbal consent was taken prior to conducting the interviews. The names of participants were not mentioned anywhere to maintain their anonymity. In addition, safety and privacy of the participants were ensured throughout, in line with the research ethics.

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, conducted face-to-face in a conversational style in their vernacular language. The interviews were initiated with general questions followed by further probes and lasted between 1.5-2 hours. The participants were asked about the conditions that propelled them towards early marriage and emphasis was placed on garnering their personal narratives and opinions. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim in Hindi and then translated into English. In accordance with the analytical framework suggested by Ritchie and Spencer (1994), the textual data was sifted, charted and sorted in accordance with key issues and themes, both emergent and *a priori*.

### **Results and Discussion**

In this section, the themes derived through analysis and excerpts from the interviews have been used to weave an exhaustive description of the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of early marriage.

### **Profile of the Study Participants**

The initial rapport formation and preliminary probes in the interview helped in understanding the socio-demographic profile of the study participants. The women reported their current ages to be between 20 and 35 years and revealed that they were married between the ages of 12-15 years. The participants typically had low levels of educational attainment as one-third of the participant (n=5) were illiterate and the remaining (n=10) had studied up to primary level at the *Madarsah* or school in their native maternal villages. All the participants, being Meo Muslims and followers of Islam, had reportedly learnt to read an Urdu primer to facilitate their reading of the religious text in the *Quran*.

The women who had been to school stated that they dropped out sooner or later, as they did not find school education useful and were occupied with learning the skills of managing home and hearth from their mothers and grandmothers. A participant who studied up to Class 4 disclosed:

‘School was a total waste of time. I hardly remember anything from those days. The only thing I can recall is, we had one male teacher controlling 3-4 classes altogether and the senior school was located far away. It was co-educational as well and I couldn’t have travelled so far. My parents didn’t say anything, rather, I myself dropped out studies at school were futile and difficult. After that, I received “Deenitaleem” (religious learning) from my grandmother at home only.’

This clearly indicates lack of motivation and interest in school education, which was found irrelevant and not relatable or of any local applicability. It is apparent that education did not match the material or cultural reality of the local community. It also mirrors the crippled state of affairs with regard to girls’ continuation of schooling in the community. In addition, access to secondary schools was also problematic for girls, given that such schools were often located long distances away from their homes and there were insufficient public transport facilities. Khan et al. (2009) also noted that in rural areas, the parents are fearful for their daughters’ commute and the potential for sexual assault or involvement with men. The chances of rural girls pursuing education after marriage are also dismal because of the new responsibilities and wrongful perceptions that they may become poilt and become disrespectful. One of the participants recalled:

‘I was the youngest among my six siblings and very playful and naughty as a child. My “orhani” (scarf) always used to slip past my head while studying and playing...and my mother would often scold and scare me

that she would nail it to my head with a hammer. I was also almost always reluctant to do housework and interested in going to school and playing. My family was so bothered about what neighbours would say...and they married me off early, probably thinking that my easy-going ways might not be seen in a good light.'

The general lack of awareness was not only due to the absence of schooling, but also to the absence of media penetration in the villages, with women in particular having no access to television, radio, newspapers or mobile phones, in the majority of families. The women revealed that as newly wedded adolescent girls, they hardly had any knowledge pertaining to sexuality, reproduction or family planning.

In terms of family type, the joint and extended family norm was found prevalent, and the number of children borne by the participants ranged from 3-8. The high fertility rate in the community was also evident through the secondary data. The DLHS-4 data for Mewat confirmed that 46.5 per cent of women in the 15-49 years age group reported a birth order of three and above (IIPS, 2012-13). In most cases, women reportedly had sexual liaisons with their husbands within a year of their marriage (cohabitation), resulting in a high fertility rate. Bhat et al. (2005) also determined that a woman who has an early marriage is more likely to give birth to a higher number of children, subsequently compromising her own health. It was noted that the women considered conception and giving birth as God's will. Moreover, they largely believed that use of contraception or undergoing abortion to intentionally prevent a creature from coming into the world as sinful. It was observed that the social and religious norms, as learnt from village elders and propagated by the local *Maulvi* (religious leader), were mostly adhered to by all the participants and their families.

The women initially declined practising any formal vocation or their engagement in any economic activity and widely perceived themselves as housewives. However, when enquired about their daily schedule, the women stated that besides household chores and looking after children, they tended to livestock (cattle or goats) and helped their husbands with farming in seasonal agricultural operations such as weeding and harvesting. Firewood collection and fetching potable water from community connections for daily needs also added to their heavy workload. It was further revealed that they undertook many of the domestic duties even while they were unmarried, such as helping their mothers in cooking, washing, taking care of siblings, and stall-feeding domestic animals. It was

observed that the young girls, unlike boys of the same age, were found to be frequently engaged in household tasks. These practices were assumed to be an inseparable and necessary part of a woman's life and eventually served as rites of passage meant to ensure the marriageability of girls.

In the community, the girls as young as 5-6 years old were observed to have been trained by their mothers and grandmothers in preserving their modesty by covering their heads. Likewise, the adolescent girls were forced to adopt conventional gender roles in performing domestic chores. Young boys and men, on the other hand, were seen to be spending a considerable part of their day socialising or in recreational activities. Although women performed a great deal of arduous work, it was apparent that the control of income, land and other assets lay in the hands of males of the household. Women also showed restricted mobility and were financially dependent on the older males of the household. The imbalance of responsibilities between women and men was palpable in the community.

### **Reasons and Motivations for Early Marriage**

Addressing child marriage requires recognition of the various factors that contribute to the perpetuation of the practice. The participants expressed several reasons, both personal and contextual, which pushed them towards early marriage. It was considered significant to identify and understand these motivations to suitably engage with and address the allied implications.

### ***Puberty Signals Time for Marriage***

It was put forth by most women that attainment of puberty through the onset of menarche and the development of secondary sexual characteristics signalled the time to enter a marital alliance, irrespective of the actual age of girl. It was attempted on part of the family and kin to keep a minimum time gap between menarche and marriage. In some cases, the alliances and suitable partners were looked for and, in few cases, girls were married but '*gauna did not happen*' i.e. they were not sent for cohabitation with husbands until a year or two later. One of the participants argued:

'Marriage is an important thing for society, it has to happen. How does it make a difference if it happens today or tomorrow? The sooner, the better. The young girls are like fertile land, ready to be sown in and bear fruit. The young females are storehouses of (sexual) energy and are better in adjusting to a new household. They quickly learn and are able to understand what lies ahead for them... It is easier to transplant a young sapling in new soil, than a tree.'



It was observed that pubescent girls were not seen as children, but as adults and potential brides. This narrative pointed out the value attached to marriage as an important social institution and its importance in regulating sexuality and giving a social identity to the young girls. Post marriage, these girls acquired the status of an adult irrespective of their physical growth and mental readiness. It was observed that most young brides were burdened with additional responsibilities as wives and soon as mothers. They hardly had any support, assets, or life experience to meet these challenges.

### ***Respect for Parents' Decision***

In the Meo community, children are groomed and socialised to learn to respect the opinions of the family elders from early on. Older people are considered wiser and believed to know what is best for the young and less experienced family members. In such a scenario of patriarchal connectivity, as Joseph (1999) argued, notions like autonomy and individualisation are missing while bonding, commitment and loyalty to a family are expected as normal. In tandem, all the women participants admitted that their marriage was their parents' decision, and they respected it. It was mostly fathers and close kin who decided on when and to whom the girl should marry and arranged for the wedding. Even though this indicated women's lack of autonomy they pointed out that it was not enforced and they had entered matrimony of their own free will so as to fulfil familial obligations and perceived it to be in their interest. A participant recalling her past, confided:

'Notwithstanding the legal importance of consent, this narrative indicates 'manufactured consent' where in the actual consent of young girls did not hold any merit in the selection of a spouse or deciding on an appropriate time / age for marriage. It was apparent that the young girls were indoctrinated to believe that early marriage is normal and desirable.'

### ***Family Honour and Girls' Chastity***

It was observed that finding a suitable alliance and marrying one's children was deemed as a huge responsibility for parents. In cultures and communities where sexual purity of the girls is prioritised and associated with family honour, and where premarital sex is forbidden, marriage serves to control the sexuality of women by preventing involvement in any romantic love relationships that could stain the family's reputation (Gangoli and McCarry, 2009; Henry et al., 2015).

The participants reported that adolescents of both sexes were not permitted to mingle as they reached puberty and love marriages were

culturally forbidden. Unlike several other Muslim communities, parallel or cross-cousin marriages are not followed by Meo-Muslims. It was further revealed that the Meo community does not allow marriage within the same 'gotr/pal' (clan) and children residing within one geographical unit or village are considered as brothers and sisters. The participants also reasoned that their parents married them off early to avert any mishaps or loose moral practices such as premarital liaisons or physical or sexual assault that could have happened to them as young girls. It was a common belief that young girls could unintentionally attract and lure boys or men and consequently, might themselves become victims of *malafide* intentions.

One woman expressed:

'I used to help my mother in fetching water for domestic needs. The boys in the neighbourhood would often follow us to the hand pump and offer unwarranted help in filling or lifting the buckets. When this happened a couple of times, my mother understood their intentions from their giggles and comments. She scolded them many times but...she must have realised that I was not safe and coaxed my father to settle me into marriage. More than me, she wanted to protect the family honour.'

This indicates a high value attached to virginity and chastity and the general thought was to keep the girls safe and protect them from unwanted sexual advances, molestation, rape and premarital liaisons, which could have been possible only through the marriage of the pubescent girls. However, it was found that these young girls did not receive any preparation or guidance from their parents or any community members for the impending sexual life within marriage. A culture of silence prevailed on such issues and the women had internalised this.

### ***Religious Beliefs in Favour of Early Marriage***

The Meos have a distinct ethnic and cultural identity, having amalgamated the traditions of both Hindus and Muslims over centuries. However, of late, with the profound influence of *Tablighi Jammāt* (a non-political Sunni Islamic mission), most families have adopted a strict and conservative Islamic way of life as governed by *Shariah* (Muslim jurisprudence). Thus, as per the Muslim personal law, they consider marriage of girls soon after menarche as part of their Islamic tradition. Many of the participants also justified early marriage based on such religious beliefs. The women divulged that there was a strong social pressure on their parental family to conform to this norm and 14-16 years was perceived as an ideal age for girls to be married. One of them mentioned:

‘Timely marriage of children (as soon as they reach puberty) is given prominence in the holy Quran. It is a “Farz “(duty) on parents mentioned in Shariah. The present generation of children are getting spoilt by media and mobile phones, they might commit a sin (intimacy or sex outside marriage) and as adults and custodians of culture, we have to ensure that we do not give them a chance or let this immorality happen.’

In concurrence with Lane (2011), it can be argued that although most parents or close kin could ascertain the physical or physiological maturity of the adolescent girls, the aspect of psychological or mental readiness that is required in Islam was typically disregarded while settling their daughter’s marriage. Shehada (2008) also recognised that families use Islamic law as justification when in reality they themselves determine at what age their daughters can marry depending on the overall socio-economic and political factors. As religion is interpreted differently by each society, it is vital to consider the broader context in which the religious values have been developed.

### ***Fulfilment of Socio-Emotional Needs***

Some participants saw marriage as an opportunity to experience independence and fulfil socio-emotional needs. For instance, one participant shared:

‘As girls reach puberty, they also get feelings towards opposite sex, however, in our community, to develop those feelings is considered a sin, and we cannot discuss these emotions openly with anyone. Then, getting married seems like a valid licence to give a vent to such feelings... I never saw any romantic film but when my marriage was fixed, I used to keep thinking and dreaming about my husband, it was such an age. There was a lot of excitement in my heart...But, few years down the line, I realised how momentary those feelings were, the burden of starting and raising a family overpowers everything.’

Berhane-Selassie (1993, cited in Ahmed et al., 2013: 84) also observed that ‘young girls always think about love and good treatment, but they never realise the responsibility and the pressure that they have to face after the marriage.’ The narrative also indicated that the participant was naive about the looming responsibilities of being a wife and then a mother. It also emphasised that women were conditioned to be sexually passive and marriage was seen as a strategy to control and discipline their sexuality.

### ***Economic Reasons***

In the global appraisal of child marriage levels, UNICEF (2005) found out

that in all countries, the phenomenon of child marriage is most widespread amongst the poorest 20 per cent of the population. Thus poverty and economic reasons are important factors that prompt early marriage in the developing world. It was observed that Meos, despite their low incomes, spent prolifically on weddings. The lavish feast involves inviting the whole village and extended clan members of the families of both the bride and groom. In addition, the customs of dowry and *mehr* (bride price given by the groom to the bride) also coexist in Meo culture. Thus a marriage ceremony at home often plunged families into debt. In accord, the participants informed that financial constraints led several families to marry off their daughters whenever they found it economically feasible to conduct a wedding. It was reported that most weddings were organised in the months of May-June after harvest when farmers obtained money by selling their agricultural produce.

One woman reported that she was married through the custom of *Adlaa-badleeor* exchange, where siblings (brother and sister) of one family are married to two siblings of another family. This was done to economise on the ceremonial expenses accompanying marriage. Likewise, two sisters were sometimes married off together into the same family. This was evident in another case where a younger sister was wedded to the brother-in-law of her older sister and both marriages were solemnised on the same day.

In yet another case, a family's monetary savings also decided the fate of young girls. A participant cited:

'My father worked as a heavy vehicle driver and returned home just once in a year. Every visit by the father was initially meant to impregnate my mother...(laughed)...-and later, when we a bunch of seven sisters and two brothers grew up, his visits were to marry us off one by one with whatever money he brought from work.'

This narrative showed that a large number of children and limited economic means with families also boosted the practice of early marriage. Such economic hardships have also been identified by Tremayne (2006) as a key determinant of early marriage. In addition, women's own lack of education and necessary skills deprived them from pursuing or taking advantage of any economic opportunities. The lack of financial independence apparently made them less likely to negotiate the decision to postpone or refuse marriage. Sagade (2005) also argued that due to dearth of alternatives other than the role of wife and mother from which a woman's social identity and economic status are derived, the women have no choice but to continue and be a part of the custom of early marriage.

Thus the participants pointed towards a plethora of personal, familial, religious and economic factors to rationalise their marriage during adolescence. However, it is apparent that the disadvantaged position of women in the patriarchal Meo community, coupled with the gendered social norms of appropriate female behaviour, primarily dictated this phenomenon of early marriage.

### **Experiences and Perceived Effects of Early Marriage**

It is established that early marriage forces girls into adulthood before they are emotionally and physically mature and has a harmful bearing on their health as well as educational, economic and social development. It was found that Meo women who have had an early marriage did not explicitly admit or recognise the detrimental effects of this practice. However, many of the drawbacks they witnessed or experienced were culled through their narratives. The negative consequences of child marriage on sexual, reproductive, and psychological health of the young brides have been well documented in a number of studies. The concerns raised by the participants corroborate these findings.

#### ***Effects on the Physical Health***

Most of the Meo girls and women could be observed as thin, frail and weak due to limited means, precarious livelihoods, large family size, poor nutrition and strenuous work. Even though they belong to an agricultural community, the food security and access to clean water, sanitation and healthcare are highly uncertain across most villages, all of which have an adverse effect on their physical health. It was unequivocally stated by all participants that looking after their family, children and animals was their priority and their own personal health was secondary. It can be inferred that the young girls are conditioned to behave in a docile manner and being submissive and sacrificing are seen as women's prime virtues. Thus these women most often ignored their own wellbeing.

Regarding sexual and reproductive health, many of the participants revealed that they were abruptly exposed to sex and forced into sexual activity by their husbands soon after marriage and cohabitation. Sexual intercourse was cited as a painful experience, apparently because of their physiological immaturity. However, sexually satisfying the husbands was cited as a necessary and prime obligation of wives. The women reportedly faced several reproductive health problems, but most of them (n=11) did not

view these as adverse effects caused by their marrying at a tender age. It was believed that young females are strong enough to bear and rear children, and as age advances the attractiveness of a woman, her sexual energy and fertility decline.

Further, it was observed that early marriage led to early and multiple pregnancies resulting in several health complications, notably anaemia, weight loss, fistula and uterine prolapse. A high incidence of anaemia in Meo women was also evident from the fact that all of them reportedly received intravenous iron supplementation at the health centres in their pre- and post-natal stages.

Most participants (n=12) pointed towards their inability to negotiate with their husbands on safer sexual practices as the young girls being raised to be submissive and subservient to males. Some women also cited religious reasons for not using contraception. Two participants who had used contraceptive pills to space children, lamented about the side effects and discontinued their further use. In the absence of any family planning measures, the women's bodies weakened excessively as a result of blood loss through frequent pregnancies and birthing.

It also emerged in conversations that many women in the community suffered from menstrual irregularities, mild to severe reproductive tract or urinary tract infections and perpetual *Kamzori* (weakness). Several participants resorted to traditional home remedies or visited faith healers for cures as seeking medical attention and healthcare was not their personal but a familial decision. Four women also mentioned miscarriages but these were thought to have been caused by *ooparihawa* (negative vibes) and evil spirits. These women were not aware of the fact that their miscarriages could have been due to weakening of the uterine lining, a condition caused by multiple and closely spaced pregnancies.

### ***Effects on the Mental Health***

The new multiple roles acquired post marriage are a huge responsibility and psychologically quite demanding for a young girl. This may alter a girl's perception of herself and of her marital relationship. A few psychological disadvantages mentioned by UNICEF (2001) are forced sexual relations, denial of freedom and personal development. Most participants (n=9) opined that although their mothers trained them in household chores prior to marriage, they still faced challenges in meeting the expectations of maintaining a family and rearing child.

Forced sexual encounters with husbands were seen as a source of stress and fear. Ahmed et al. (2013) have also found that the young girls who do

not have biologically matured enough bodies to enable safe sexual intercourse, compulsive or forced sexual relations with their husbands could result in physical and mental trauma. These experiences were depictive of imbalanced power relations between husband and wife. The women divulged being denied the right to freely express their views or opinions, which in the future could culminate in depression. A petite woman, 20-year-old and mother of three children confessed:

I got married at 14 years of age. It was so bad losing my childhood friends, leaving my home and settling in this new place. Comfort of maternal home is incomparable...Here, in front of my in-laws, I could not even raise my head or eat and sleep properly. Initially, I felt so shameful in sleeping separately with my husband...I couldn't rest even during painful menstrual periods and had to do a lot of backbreaking work even during pregnancy, when I was only 16. My joints pain like older women. I wish I could go back in time and run away.'

In concurrence, Khan and Lynch (1997) have also noted psychological symptoms like feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and severe depression in the child brides.

### ***Physical and Sexual Abuse***

Early marriage has been found to be associated with an increased risk of intimate partner violence, abuse, and exploitation (Jejeebhoy and Cook, 1997; UNICEF, 2005). This is because the girls who are married young often lack status and power within their marriages and households and had been conditioned to believe that violence is justified. One participant admitted with teary eyes that:

'I was only 13 when I got married. It was a new home and new people, so adjustment took some time. In the beginning, I used to cry discreetly because of my mother in law's constant scoffs. My husband would also beat me up with firewood if I didn't cook properly or refused (sex), I felt anxious and fearful all the time...At times, after getting dirty (engaging in intercourse) for the whole night, I had no choice but to miss my morning Namaz (prayers)...though, with children, things slightly improved. I have become used to all this banter now.'

This narrative highlights the domineering behaviour of husbands and in-laws and limited autonomy and bargaining power of young married girls, who end up coping within a physically violent and sexually abusive marriage.

It was observed that most women internalised this harmful belief that

their husbands are justified in assaulting them. Such victimised women showed an immensely low perception of self-esteem due to their social conditioning and economic dependence on the spouses. Thus early marriage perpetuated women's vulnerability to gender-based violence.

### ***Effects on Education, Employment Opportunities and Mindsets***

It is acknowledged that when girls are married early, their formal schooling comes to an end, and their educational trajectory becomes distorted. Khanna et al. (2013, cited in Parsons et al., 2015: 15), argued that “depriving a girl of the opportunity to learn, limits her prospects for employment and her ability to gain useful skills for the formal labour sector, inevitably impacting her lifelong earning potential.” All the participants admitted that for the sake of marriage, they were either taken out of school or had dropped out by themselves. Even though some women were adept at sewing, knitting, weaving and pottery, none of them had ever attempted to undertake any skill-based income earning opportunity.

One of the participants also expressed her anguish over not being able to help her children with studies. However, it was usually believed that men being the primary breadwinners have to provide income to run the household. Only in cases of dire need or poverty did the women from labouring households provide paid labour in public employment programmes of the Government or during harvest season in the fields of large farms. In tandem, Chaaban and Cunningham (2011) affirmed that a lack of participation in the labour force may have lasting repercussions not just for women and their families, but cumulatively this could shrink the possibility of economic growth in communities.

It was also observed that negligent or lower levels of education not only decreased the learning and earning potential of the Meo girls, it also deprived them of the ability to express and assert themselves and negatively altered their mindsets. Furthermore, the lack of formal education was also found to have intergenerational effects. Ooto-Oyortey and Pobi (2003), in their study of early marriage in Africa, found anecdotal evidence to indicate that the majority of married girls in rural communities tend to have mothers who married early. This was evident, when one of the participants stated: ‘Girls need not work hard at school. Learning basic life skills and nuances of household work is important. All degrees fail if a girl cannot make a round “roti” (bread). My eldest girl child is also seemingly not interested in studies anymore. Time has come for her to learn and hone



homemaking skills. She passed class V, which is sufficient enough; she won't become collector/officer after studying for few more years. Whether educated or illiterate, all Meon is are destined to shape animal dung cakes, holding a "kalam" (pen) would serve no purpose.'

This narrative signified the conventional and conformist mindset of the participant and lack of progressive thinking, fuelled by her being deprived of education and driven into an early marriage. Thus the girls whose mothers themselves married young and had no education are more liable to be married early, setting up the vicious cycle of vulnerability in subsequent female generations.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The study examined some of the reasons governing the phenomenon of early marriage of girls in the Meo community of Mew at and its latent and manifest effects on the women who married young. It was found that the socially produced gender roles discriminated against girls through negligible opportunities for education and self-development and a lack of freedom of choice and expression.

The findings show that a comprehensive approach is needed to develop and implement culturally sensitive programmes and interventions aimed at progressively mobilising families and communities against this practice. Although this involves the difficulty of challenging the existing social norms, strategies such as dialogue with religious chiefs and key opinion leaders, personal meetings with parents, and behaviour change communication and advocacy campaigns could make a difference. This would help to build an enabling and supportive environment for the girls, who otherwise lack agency and power.

In addition to the efforts of preventing the early marriage of children and adolescents, it is extremely important to render support to young women and girls who are already married. As the study indicates, these women have pressing concerns which are largely overlooked. Interventions based on empowering them with pertinent sexual and reproductive health information, life skills, safe spaces, supportive networks and those that improve their access to economic resources, are highly called for.

The study intends to stimulate further discussion on tackling the contentious issue of early marriage as a steppingstone towards improving the quality of life of women in the study community.

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