

RURAL WOMEN AND MARRIAGE

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INTRODUCTION

The present study entitled **Rural Women and Marriage** is an outcome of field study covering tri-dimensional aspects of Indian rural women. These dimensions are marriage, education and decision making role of women. The researcher observed that the condition of women neither wholly changed nor wholly traditional and deprived. An amalgamated spectrum of rural women in changing order and their problem perspective is a floating reality.

Due to spread of educational facilities, growing and advancing scientific and technological inventions, increasing rate of industrial environment, changing attitude of rural population towards modernism, changing frontiers of Indian traditional values, better job opportunities have all left a subsection of Indian women society for tending to change in modern era.

In the wake of above mentioned forces, very surprising results have been drawn on Indian Rural Women. However, women throughout the world and rural women in India particularly are characterized by low status, low level of education, low level of health conditions and employment. They are suffering from insecurity, exploitation in addition to poverty. While present study reveals that women have shifted their past positions from traditional to modern social development. Education mixed with urban culture has of course changed the outlook towards early marriage and education of girl child.

However women are still not provided their due share of importance in taking decisions regarding marriage; age of marriage, selection of spouse, age of child bearing etc.

In rural India, agricultural sector provides better opportunities to rural women to raise their family income and own social position. But most of their economic activities go unnoticed and unpaid. For e.g. feeding and taking care of the cattle is a big affair from dawn to evening. The milk and milk products are sold in market and villages, which earn money. In this whole process, taking milk to various places for selling and actually selling it is considered as an economic activity but not the daily feeding of the animals. Rural women are given low social status for doing 'household work only' and men are given high social status for doing 'jobs of livelihood'. The rural women are not enjoying their due social position, social respect, honour and esteem in their family and society as a whole even after contributing physical work with full strength. That's why they do not perform decision making role in economic decisions.

Most of the rural women attribute their poor social assessment to the lack of education. They shared their changed outlook towards the worth of education. Most of the respondents suggested that education is the need of the day, it is necessary for both male and female child. Moreover it is needed for the girl child the most as she is the one who is going to manage herself away from the parents in a new house after marriage; she needs to be intellectually strong and financially independent with broad mental horizon. This can happen only with education. Most of the rural women even do not care about surpassing the usual age of marriage for their girls if it would be delayed due to completion of studies.

It is true that the work participation of women is much higher than their social status and their social position in comparison to their responsibilities is not satisfactory. This scenario is an outcome of age old male dominance and suppression of women and cannot be changed overnight. But the finding that a positive shift has been experienced in the situation is a remark of hope.

WOMEN OF RURAL PUNJAB

As of 2001 India census, Fazilka had a population of 70,324. Males constitute 52% of the population and females 48%. Fazilka has an average literacy rate of 65%. Male literacy is 72%, and female literacy is 62%. Fazilka has been assigned the status of District in 2012.

In the village Banwala, District Fazilka of Punjab, there are people belonging to different social and economic groups with rich cultural traits. But mainly two communities are found to live in the village- Sikh Jatt families (Sardaars) and Bagdi families. The social and cultural life indicates the values of tolerance, democratic functioning and host culture. Like other women in the country the rural Punjabi women do all kinds of domestic works of cleaning, washing, cooking, distribution of food items, feeding the cattle, milking the animals, taking care of the children etc. Married women observe some rules of avoidance particularly with the senior male members of the husband's family. The wife does not address the husband by name. Married women are expected to cover their head in the presence of elderly members of the husband's family as well as other respectable persons of the society. Women take very active part in agriculture. They also do other kinds of economic activities like feeding and taking care of the cattle, collecting milk and making milk products for selling. However these activities go unnoticed as described earlier which add to their low social position.

The observation of the study is that the women do not play significant role in the decision making of the most important event marriage. They are hardly involved in the selection of spouse, deciding age of marriage or child bearing.

However the educational status of rural women of Punjab is better than that of many other states of India. Also they accept the importance of female education for improving their social status.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The present study on rural women was undertaken to understand the changing patterns (if any) in the marriage of women. The impact of various developmental activities during post-independence period on rural society as a whole and status of women in particular is considerable. Though the pace of change vary from area to area and community to community. The present study was designed to assess the changing role of women in the institution of marriage in rural societies.

Women respondents from the rural Punjab have been selected for the study. It is to be mentioned that total twenty five respondents were included in the study. The main objectives of the study are:-

- To find out the median age of marriage of girls in the rural area of Punjab.
- To analyze various reasons for which parents choose to marry off their daughters early.
- To understand the relationship between educational expansion and changing patterns in the age of girls at marriage and role of women in the decision making in the rural settings of India.
- To analyze the effects of early marriage on the physical health of young women.

AGE OF MARRIAGE

During the last six decades of independence, serious attempts have been made both by the government of India and NGO's to propagate delayed marriage, for obvious reasons of controlling the population, as it would mean delayed childbirth. Besides, it is argued that delayed marriage would have a positive impact on the health of the women as also of the infants.

Age at marriage is also a key intervening variable in the status attainment process (Bartz and Nye, 1970). This is based on the assumption that, other things remaining constant, late marriage will help to give opportunities for increase in educational attainment and obtain better occupation and better income- all of which are virtually closed to a girl who marries at 15 or 16, will not only help women understand the value of spacing children and limiting family size later, but also will enable them to play more active roles in family, community, and national development" (Population Reports, 1979)

The marital status of the women of respondent families of the village in the sample according to age shows that 52 percent women married in the age- group of 18-20 years. 24 percent each of the respondents got married in the age- group of 15-17 and 21-24. Child marriage is not prevalent in the village. Marriage of girls within a few years of attaining puberty was preferred to in these societies long time back. But at present marriage of girls at early age is not popular. Even the women who are now above sixty, reported to get married at an age of about 19-23. 100 percent of the respondents of the village opined that they did not prefer early marriage.

Murti Devi (45), married at the age of 20; talked about the change in the scenario. She said that "now a days parents are very much aware about the education of their children and educated children are consulted definitely in matters of marriage be a girl or a boy. Marrying a girl at an early age (before 18) is a rare phenomenon".

AGE OF GIRLS AT MARRIAGE IN THE RURAL AREA OF PUNJAB

Table 1.1 Age of Girls at Marriage in rural area of Punjab

Age Group	15- 17 yrs	18- 20 yrs	21- 23 yrs	24- 26 yrs
% of respondents	24	52	24	-
Number of respondents	06	13	06	-

Note: Total 25 women have been included in the interview in the village Banwala of district Fazilka of Punjab.

Median Age of girls at marriage

The girls in rural area of Punjab are found to marry at a median age of 20 years. It comes totally on the opposite lines of the hypothesis. It was hypothesized for the present study that inspite of various laws legitimizing the age of girls at marriage, the rural India is far from abiding by the rules and that the percentage of girls marrying at an early age is a large figure in rural India. However the findings proved that the age of girls for marriage is towards an increasing mode. 76% of the respondents got married at the age of 18 and above, which is a remarkable factual finding.

Further it is found that only one respondent conceived before the age of 18. All the other respondents conceived above the age of 18. 20% of the respondents conceived in the age group of 18-20 and 64% of the respondents conceived in the age- group of 21-23 years. The rest 12% of the respondents conceived in the age- group of 24-26 years.

Table 1.2 Age of married women at the time of first conception (pregnancy)

Age group	24-26 yrs	21-23 yrs	18-20 yrs	Less than 18
% of respondents	12	64	20	04
No. of respondents	03	16	05	01

Note: - 2 Women out of total 25 women suffered miscarriage during first pregnancy.

Only 16% of the respondents reported physical problems during and after pregnancy. 84% of the respondents did not report any kind of physical and other problems during or after pregnancy.

Table 1.3 If physical problems faced during pregnancy

Response	YES	NO
% of respondents	16	84
No. of respondents	04	21

Regarding adjustment in the new house after marriage, all of the respondents reported that they did not encounter any difficulty in adjusting in the new house. The load of household work was never felt burdened as they were accustomed to do this work.

Around 30% women reported that they regret the present condition of neglect of their work. They put lot of physical labor in various activities like cleaning, washing, bringing drinking water, cooking, distributing food items, feeding cattle, milking the animals, making milk products, rearing children etc. Besides, they take active part in agriculture. But they are hardly considered the earning member of the house.

Sunita Rani (30), married at the age of 17; said that the preferred age of marriage of girls should be 23-24. Delivery problems are common result of early marriage. She feels that she herself got married at an early age and suffered miscarriage during first conception at the age of 19. Had she been married at a later age, she would have got education and hence the awareness of right and wrong. She said that she will not marry her daughter before the age of 23.

EDUCATION OF RURAL WOMEN

The National committee on Women's Education (1958) stated that the issue of women's education is so vital that the government should assume the responsibility for its rapid development and it also should ensure that the educational gap between girls and boys is reduced at the earliest.

Education can redefine women's role and status. An educated woman can fight for a just social order. Studies have again and again proved that women's education can also bring about changes in the family size, fertility, decision making and participation. Therefore, extension of equal educational opportunities to women enhances the prospect for relative equality within the family.

The real education to be imparted to women should be not only for literacy but mainly for critical consciousness about the oppressive structures that keep them in the present position. Parsons (1951) pointed out that the educational system of any society is related to the social system.

Today rural women are making fast progress and becoming more assertive. They are not only improving their own lives but are making every effort to educate their daughters and give them the freedom which they did not receive themselves. This points to a better future for women in villages.

Regarding Education, female education in Punjab has been expanded considerably in recent years. The collected data about the educational status of women revealed that 20 percent women each have studied till higher secondary school and Metric or intermediate level. 20% of married women are found to be illiterate, 28% have studied till primary level and only 12% have studied till graduation level. The graduated married women want to work in government sector or private sector other than agriculture according to their educational qualifications.

Table 2.1 Education of the married women in the Village Banwala.

Educational categories	Illiterate	Primary	Higher secondary	Metric-Intermediate	College level
% of Respondents	20	28	20	20	12
Number of Respondents	05	07	05	05	03

With education women's access to and availability of social opportunities also increases. New opportunities will lead to a conflict with existing position and the conflict is the first step towards a changed thinking and life pattern. This first step was visible in the rural women of Banwala. They described the advantages and necessity of education for all individuals and girls particularly. Lack of opportunities for education in rural areas is responsible for the existing gap between urban and rural women, which led to the deterioration of rural women, especially in the areas of social participation.

Women respondents revealed their firm desire to educate their girl children in order to make them intellectually and economically independent and strong, to strengthen their role in the decision making and to bring value to their economic activities (rather than going unnoticed in the name of household work).

Jaswinder Kaur (42), married at the age of 19, passed metric exam; feels that education is must for everybody in today's world. It is must for girls. An educated girl who has to spend life with in-laws gets a good prospectus in her married life. Education makes her economically independent and mentally strong. It brings confidence of taking decisions on her own and lead an empowered life.

Shah and Shah (1978) pointed out that the modern educational system introduced by British in India did effect the traditional caste based rigid stratification system prevalent in Indian society and introduction of the liberal ideas like democracy, equality, justice etc. influenced the traditional relationships in the family.

Hence it can be said that awareness of these liberal ideas through education is observable in the rural women of the village Banwala.

DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Decision making role of men and women varies from society to society. This chapter attempts to analyse the marriage and child related decision making role of rural women.

Decision making is a mental process, based on conscious reasoning. It is a process by which an evaluation of the meaning and consequence of alternative line of conduct is made. Decision making is an important tool of empowerment. A women who can choose from various alternatives and decide what is best for her is an empowered woman. Awareness and education sharpens the intellect. There are instances of women being effective in decision-making and implementation because they have been motivated and made aware of their rights.

In our society it is generally felt that women are not competent enough to take important decisions, so much so that all their personal decisions also are taken by their men folk. Decisions regarding education, marriage, career, child birth, etc. are purely personal but girls and women are not allowed to take these decisions on their own. In the villages generally women are not consulted in making independent decisions related to marriage. However, due to education and economic independence women have started taking part in decision making process in the family and are also taking independent decisions, but this is confined to a small number, mostly in urban areas. (Rahman 2007)

Data on marriage related decisions in this study indicated that the would be bride are not given any decision making power before or during the marital ceremony. Also, male elder members rather than female elder members contribute more in the marriage related decisions; from deciding correct age of marriage for girls or selection of spouse to expenditure on various rituals of marriage. In many cases joint decisions are also taken for the marriage of a girl. A majority of women said that mothers are consulted in fixing daughter's marriage. This shows that importance is given to mother's decision making ability hence she is consulted. It is a satisfactory finding.

Very small no. of women respondents (around 15% on an average) admitted that they were consulted at the time of their marriage in selection of spouse or expenditure or even the readiness for marriage.

Table 3.1 Role of women in decision (related to marriage) making process.

Decisions	Time of marriage	Selection of spouse	Expenditure on various marriage rituals
% of respondents who were consulted for the decision	12	16	12
No. of respondents	3	4	3

Generally women are not allowed to take their own decisions and this has become a tradition so much so that many women feel they are not capable of taking decisions independently. This is a glaring example of ‘gender conditioning’, where women are brainwashed for generations and finally they become dependent. (Rahman, 2007).

Gurpreet Kaur (28), married at the age of 20; shared that “women do lot of work, indeed most of the work but they are not valued. Most of the agricultural activities are performed by women, they also do household chores and take care of the cattle, children and aged at home but of no use. They often say, she lives at home doing nothing”. Gurpreet further revealed that marriage decisions are never taken by girls and it is correct since at that time we do not possess the maturity of taking such an important decision. However, education could have brought the desirable maturity of taking marriage related decisions.

Data on the child related decisions have been collected on the issues like- correct time or age (mother) for child bearing, age of schooling, level and type of education. Findings revealed that women have no control on the decision of child bearing age or schooling and level and type of education for the child. It is further

revealed that the joint decision of getting good education for the child irrespective of the sex is a largely found phenomenon. All the women consider that children's education is a must.

Table 3.2 Role of women in Decision (child related) Making Process.

Decision	Time of child bearing.	Age of schooling for the children	Type of education for the children
% of respondents who were consulted for the decision	0	12	12
No. of respondents	0	3	3

It is found that only one respondent conceived before the age of 18. All the other respondents conceived above the age of 18. 20% of the respondents conceived in the age group of 18-20 and 64% of the respondents conceived in the age- group of 21-23 years. The rest 12% of the respondents conceived in the age-group of 24-26 years.

Karamjeet Kaur (47), married at 21 and first conception at 23, said that readiness of women is never a question in child birth. And the physical problems during and after pregnancy is her fate. She suggested that the men folk can better decide about the schooling and education of the children as they have to bear the expenditure of education of the children. They get out of house more often and thus are exposed to better alternatives.

Opinions of women regarding their role in family matters show that in most cases family matters are controlled by their husbands and father in the house. However, the husbands usually consult their wives in important matters of the family. Joint family system dominated the rural areas. Thus, most of the women are required to take permission of their husbands and mothers in law for going out elsewhere. All of the respondent women expressed that their role regarding saving and investment was not significant.

THEORETICAL FRAME OF THE STUDY

The driving force behind various Women's studies is Feminism. The main approaches of women's studies can be described here for the present study.

- According to socialist feminists powerlessness of women is rooted in four basic structures: those of production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization of children. Unequal sex roles operate both in family and economy.
- The conflict perspective explains various aspects of our social world by looking at which groups have power and benefit from a particular social arrangement. For example, feminist theory argues that we live in a patriarchal society—a hierarchical system of organization controlled by men. Although there are many varieties of feminist theory, most would hold that feminism “demands that existing economic, political, and social structures be changed” (Weir and Faulkner 2004).
- According to the Marxian theory, Capitalism produces a certain type of psychoanalytic dynamic which forces women to subjugation. Control over female sexuality as well as household labour lead to women's subjugation. Division of labour by sex is hierarchical and rigid. It favours men, leading to patriarchy, i.e., men's control over women's fertility and labour power.
- The non-Marxian theory shifts the focus from production relations to the area of reproductive relations, which encompass control over both sexuality and fertility of women. Its main contribution is the use of 'gender' in place of 'sex'. Gender (psycho-socially constructed) roles place more restrictions on women than actually placed by sex (purely biological).
- Durkheim conceives of education as the socialization of younger generation. Keeping this view in mind researcher can assert that the rising awareness regarding education of girl child among rural women will

definitely bring about the basic social change in the society in terms of empowerment of women.

CONCLUSION

This study observed a pleasant set of surprise of changing scenario with respect to the Indian rural women. There is a rise in the age of marriage for girls in the rural Punjab. There is also observed a shift in the attitude towards education of girl child and educational status of married women.

Education is the most important factor for determining the status of women in any society, as education liberates her from many conditions of disadvantage and promotes development. The status of women particularly in the rural communities is much more disadvantageous in comparison with men in terms of share in quality of life indicators.

Child marriage is **not** prevalent in the sample village. The median age of the marriage of girls is found to be 20 years. Marriage of girls within a few years of attaining puberty was preferred in earlier times. An unmarried mature girl in a fathers' house was seen as source of great unhappiness and liability for the parents. Besides, for economic reasons too, desire to marry off their daughters as early as possible prevails, as this would reduce their burden of supporting the dependent unmarried daughters.

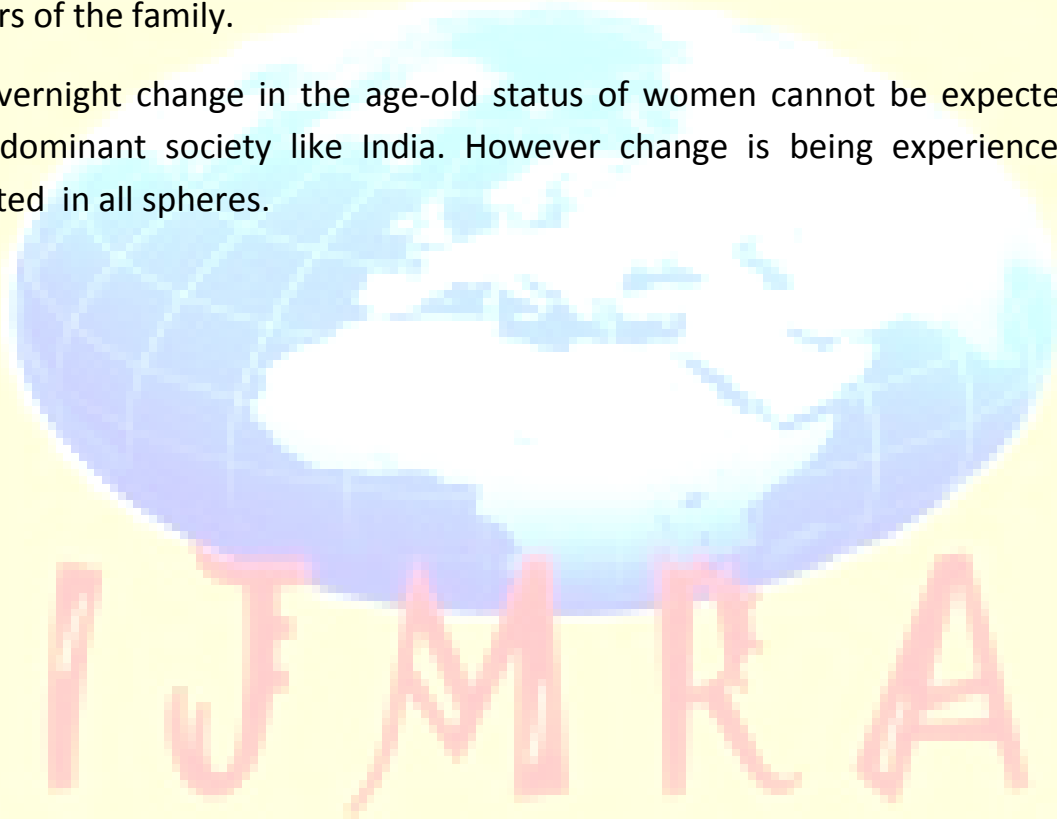
At present, marriage of girls at early age is not popular. All the women respondents opined that they do not prefer early marriage for their girl children for obvious reasons. Delayed marriage provides the desirable physical maturity for bearing children and mental maturity for bearing the various responsibilities of a new bond.

Study reveals that only 20% women respondents found to be illiterate. Rest of the women respondents are not only literate but enlightened. It means that they are well informed about the significance of education in the improvement of social position of women. 100% of the women respondents revealed their firm

desire to educate their girl children in order to make them intellectually and economically independent and strong.

The study observed that the rural women work for longer hours than men but receive less remuneration. They are not given their due share of decision making power in decisions related to marriage or other family matters. Their involvement in the decisions regarding savings and investment is insignificant. Even smaller issues like going out needs permissions from husbands. However, most of the respondents reported that the husbands usually consult their wives in important matters of the family.

The overnight change in the age-old status of women cannot be expected in a male dominant society like India. However change is being experienced and expected in all spheres.



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