WOMEN'S STATUS AND MARRIAGE PATTERNS IN INDIA

by

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Women in India marry and begin childbearing at young ages. About 5 percent of girls between the ages of 10 and 14, slightly over 35 percent of adolescent women between the ages of 15 and 19 and about 82 percent of young women between the ages of 20 and 24 are married in India (Census of India, 1991). And because the majority of Indian births occur within marriage, unraveling issues surrounding women's status and marriage patterns is critical for gaining a deeper understanding of the basic family demography of India and the decision-making power of women within marriages.

Data from the 1998-1999 National Family Health Survey (NFHS2) of India are used in this paper to examine marriage patterns and their correlates for a sample of 64,855 once-married women between the ages of 25 and 49. We first describe the basic characteristics of marriage for the sample and then relate several measures of women's status to different dimensions of marriage: age at marriage, child marriage, late marriage, age difference between spouses, and education difference between spouses. The net effects of women's age, language, caste, standard of living, childhood residence, literacy status, and stated son preference on these dimensions of marriage are examined.

Since 1978 the legal age at marriage in India is 18 for women, yet 66 percent of the women in the sample were married before age 18. The mean age at marriage for the

sample is 16.1 years, but varies from a low of 15.4 years in the north and northwestern regions of India, to a high of 18.3 years in the Himalayan hill states. We find that 34 percent of women in the sample were married as children (age 14 and younger). However, there is considerable regional variation in the sample with the northern region showing 39 percent of women married at age 14 or younger, while the hill states show only 13 percent of women married as children. Late marriages (ages 25 and older) represent only 4 percent nationally and range from 2 percent in the north and east to 9 percent in the hill states.

The average educational difference between spouses is 2.6 years with noticeable regional variation. The hill states have an educational difference between spouses of 1.7 years. In the north, the average educational difference between spouses is 3.4 years. For a smaller sample of women (59,860) we find an average age difference between spouses of 6.1 years.

Results from the regression analysis of age at marriage show that being literate and having a literate partner, and having grown up in an urban area have positive effects on age at marriage. Women's age, Hindi speakers (compared to non-Hindi speakers), and Hindus and Muslims (compared to other religions), members of a scheduled caste or tribe (compared to other castes), and low and medium standards of living (compared to high), as well as stated son preference, all have negative effects on age at marriage.

Results from logistic regression analysis show that older women, Hindi speakers, Hindus and Muslims, those from low or medium economic class levels, and those with son preference are more likely than others to have married as a child (age 14 or younger). Women who are literate, have literate partners, and those who grew up in urban areas are

less likely to have married as children. Caste or tribal membership does not have a significant effect on child marriage.

Next, we report results from the regression analysis of age difference between spouses. Older women, Hindus and Muslims, and those from low or medium standards of living have greater age difference from spouses. However, being literate or having a literate husband, Hindi speakers, and being a member of a scheduled caste or tribe, growing up in an urban area, and having a stated son preference all negatively affect age difference between spouses.

Results from regression analysis also show that women's age, husband's literacy, Hindi speakers, Hindus and Muslims, those from a scheduled caste or tribe, and son preference have positive effects on education difference between spouses. Female literacy, low or medium standard of living, and growing up in an urban area have negative effects on education difference between spouses.

In the final paper we will also report findings relating women's status and marriage patterns to their household decision making. The net effects of measures of women's status, along with age at marriage, and age and education difference between spouses, on the relative power and freedom women have to make household and other decisions will also be examined. These decisions are about cooking, health care, purchases, going to market, visiting relatives and friends, or setting aside money.