

45% of girls still married off before 18

According to researchers specializing in social and behavioral sciences at Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH), economic and educational reforms in India have failed to lower the prevalence of child marriages, fuelling risks of multiple unwanted pregnancies, their termination and sterilizations. Even worse, it has been found to be associated with poor fertility outcomes, such as unwanted and terminated pregnancies and repeat childbirths in less than 24 months. Lead author Dr Anita Raj, associate professor at BUSPH, said the study found that more than one in five

22.6% - were married before age 16

2.6% were married before age 13

Women who married younger than 18 were significantly more likely to report no contraceptive use before their first childbirth. Nearly half - 48.4% - of women who were married as children reported giving birth before they turned 18.

"These results suggest that neither recent progress in economic and women's development, nor programmatic efforts to prevent child marriage and promote maternal and child health, have been sufficient to reduce the prevalence of child marriage in India," Dr Raj said.

The study found sterilization rates were higher for women married as children than for those married as adults - 19.5% compared to 4.6%. Overall, more than one in eight women, or 13.4%, had been sterilized. Of those not sterilized, more than three-quarters reported no present contraception use. Child brides were also at greater risk of a fistula - a tear in the genital tract - as well as pregnancy complications and death and sickness as a result of childbirth. India introduced laws against child marriage in 1929 and set the legal age for marriage at 12 years. The legal age for marriage was increased to 18 years in 1978.

The researchers said, "Women who had been child brides were 37% likelier not to have used contraception before their first child was born; seven times likelier to have three or more births; and three times likelier to have a repeat childbirth in less than 24 months."

They added, "They were also more than twice as likely to have multiple unwanted pregnancies, nearly 50% likelier to have an abortion and more than six times likelier to seek sterilization compared with counterparts who had married after the age of 18."

Child marriage was increasing India's maternal and infant deaths. Girls who give birth before the age of 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s. If a mother is under the age of 18, her infant's risk of dying in its first year of life is 60% greater than that of an infant born to a mother older than 19. Child marriage prevented many girls from continuing education and are less likely to seek medical attention for babies.