

## Too Young to Wed: Rajasthan

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Keshanta, 16, wants to be a teacher. Rajyanti, 17, hopes to become a doctor. Laali, 15, isn't sure just yet what she wants to be when she grows up. But she, like her classmates in a rural part of Jaipur in the Indian state of Rajasthan, is certain she doesn't want to be a child bride. "My life would be ruined," said Rajyanti, who at 16 resisted her parents' efforts to marry her off. "I refused the marriage because I want to study and be something."

Keshanta and Laali were 13 when their families pushed them to get married. Like Rajyanti, they refused, and, with the help of their teachers, persuaded their parents to let them continue their education.

In India, where 47 percent of girls are married before the age of 18—56 percent in rural communities like the one these girls live in—stories like these are few and far between. But programs aimed at educating and empowering girls are beginning to bear fruit, giving these girls the confidence to say "no" to early marriage, which, for many, would once have been a foregone conclusion.

Those advocating for an end to child marriage say it's hardly a trend at this point, as India still has one of the world's highest child marriage rates. In fact, an estimated 26 million Indian women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before their 18th birthdays, and another 28 million will face the same fate over the next two decades if current trends continue, according to data gathered by UNFPA, the UN Population Fund.

And the dire health, economic and social consequences of child marriage extend far beyond the girls themselves, resulting in more infant and maternal deaths, physical and sexual violence and an unending cycle of poverty in many regions of the world, not just in India. Without intervention, the UNFPA estimates another 142 million girls around the globe will become child brides over the next decade.

"Child marriage is an appalling violation of human rights and robs girls of their education, health and long-term prospects," said Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, the UNFPA's executive director. "A girl who is married as a child is one whose potential will not be fulfilled. Since many parents and communities also want the very best for their daughters, we must work together and end child marriage."

In India, there's reason for optimism. In Haryana state, north of Rajasthan, a government program called Apni Beti Apna Dhan—Our Daughter, Our Wealth in English—offers parents a savings bond when a daughter is born that pays out only if she remains unmarried until after her 18th birthday. The International Center for Research on Women is evaluating the program to determine its impact on child marriage rates, a study that should be completed later this year. But anecdotal evidence suggests it's helping delay marriage for some girls.

ICRW researchers recently examined 23 successful initiatives aimed at curbing child marriage around the globe. In addition to providing economic support to the girls and their families, strategies that worked best focused on educating parents and community members about the dangers of child marriage and providing girls with quality education and support networks.

Keshanta, Rajyanti and Laali have benefited from the actions of the Pehchan Project, run by the Centre for Unfolding Learning Potentials (CULP). The nongovernmental organization targets young girls—and even a few boys—who have dropped out of school or who have never attended, and brings them up to

speed so they can attend mainstream schools. The group also has ongoing conversations with parents about the importance of keeping their children in school. More than 5,000 children in Rajasthan have benefited from the organization's efforts over the last decade, according to Dr. O. P. Kulhari, the CULP secretary.

Because girls with no education are more than three times as likely to marry as children than girls who attend secondary school, CULP and other programs like it are instrumental in ending child marriage.

For Laali and her classmates, that means a future full of possibilities, all of their choosing.

"What do I want to do in the future in my life? I will study and be what God makes of me," she said. "We study and we can be anything."

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