



# Awakening to the tangled web of child marriage in Haryana

By Will Howling



As noted in my previous post I've recently returned from a three-week field-research visit where I was living in a rural village called Namunda, located in the state of Haryana. The purpose of my time in Namunda was to connect with youth there in order to understand their livelihoods aspirations, information which is tangent to a project with the overarching goal of ending child marriage in the state. My personal objective as an outsider though was to experience the culture of Haryana, and of the rural villages like Namunda. This experience would help me better understand child marriage and see the issue in the appropriate context.

To begin, some background: firstly, child marriage is seen as an issue that most acutely affects girls. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that in developing nations, 1 in 3 girls are married before age 18, and 1 in 9 before age 15. Marriage at this age is damaging to girls because it typically means they will not remain in school, places them at risk for domestic violence, and teenage girls are at increased risk of complication during pregnancy and childbirth, which can lead to death for them or their child. In Indian law, "child" for the purposes of marriage is defined as below 21 years of age for males, and below 18 years of age for females. Child marriage has been practiced for centuries for many reasons though, and despite being prohibited by law in 2006 it is still widespread.

Through studying various reports like [PRIA's illuminating pilot study](#) I had gained a reasonable a priori under-

standing of child marriage in Haryana - but what is the reality on the ground there? Where would I encounter child marriage? What would the people I met think about it? What factors are driving families to marry their children so young?

Over the course of three weeks I had the chance to speak with many different people. These people came from different classes and communities in the village, and different professions too. Their individual accounts of child marriage varied wildly.

I attended the district court in Panipat to interview a lawyer there - she emphatically told me “no”, child marriage does not happen locally. The Block Education Officer, who oversees administration of the schools in this district, made a similar claim. At an all girls senior secondary school, teachers claimed that girls never drop out of school (implying they couldn't be getting married) - but they were contradicted by the principle who stated only half of the girls actually make it to graduation, for various reasons.

It wasn't all denial: at the women's police station in the nearby city of Panipat, there is a 'Child Protection Officer' whose job it is to pursue reports of child marriage. She receives a few reports each month that she follows up on, with police assistance, but admits the actual number of cases is much greater than what is reported.

Then one day near the end of my visit I joined other

members of the PRIA gender team on a visit to a small habitation known as Lodha Basti. The community we met there were mostly lower caste 'rag pickers' (generally, a person who makes their livelihood rummaging through waste for salvage) - the main source of income for people living in Lodha Basti comes from collecting discarded plastic which they sell in bulk to recyclers. It was here where people, mostly women, told us about their practices around marriage. Coming from child marriages themselves, the women shared that many children there are married at just months old, and others might be married at just several years of age. The stories were endless. We were introduced to a recently married couple where neither husband nor wife was older than 10 years. Women here spoke freely on the subject, as if this were the most normal thing in the world - since for them, it is.

According to the community in Lodha Basti, multiple drivers contribute to their maintenance of the practice of child marriage. The women told us they mainly marry daughters early due to economic reasons; female children are seen as a burden due to the practice of dowry and the high cost of weddings (the daughter's family bear many of the costs of marriage). To keep costs low, families will marry their daughters at convenient times like the marriage of another sibling or a mass wedding involving multiple families. It is not unusual for 4 siblings (especially in the case of sisters) to all be married off on the same day, even if the eldest is under 18 herself. Girls are also married for reasons of safety; a married girl is thought to be less likely to be assaulted or raped because she will

stay in the home doing chores instead of going outside. Girls in the community state that harassment is rampant, and often drop out of school in adolescence due to the risks they face by just walking on the street. In part though child marriage is also a cultural practice that has been embedded into tradition over generations.

My experience living in rural Haryana showed me first-hand the challenges involved in ending child marriage. With so much ignorance (willful or otherwise) surrounding the issue, it's an uphill battle to get communities on board with changing their mindsets and practices. And with a diverse range of driving forces – from economic pressures, to widespread violence against women and girls, to simple cultural norms - it is extremely difficult to unravel and remedy the various causes driving child marriage in the first place.

When I spoke to a member of the panchayat (village government) in Namunda he stated the panchayat members follow a policy of non-interference in child marriage, despite what the law says. What he said next, though, was very heartening: it is the youth of the village, such as the members of the PRIA-sponsored KBC groups there, who take charge of reporting issues of child marriage. While child marriage may be a difficult problem to untangle, PRIA's work at sensitizing youth has at least made a difference when it comes to the young community member's awareness, and their ability to support each other or take actions when needed. Maybe it's the youth themselves who will end child marriage after all.





Our Wedding



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