



ISSN (E): 2277- 7695
ISSN (P): 2349-8242
NAAS Rating: 5.03
TPI 2019; 8(8): 446-449
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www.thepharmajournal.com
Received: 28-06-2019
Accepted: 30-07-2019

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Determinants of factors contributing to early marriage among rural women in Meghalaya: A Community-based study

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Abstract

Early marriage is particularly prevalent in rural communities including in Meghalaya, India. This study was aimed to understand the factors contributing to early marriage among Garo women in Meghalaya. A community-based study encompassing nine villages within the Gambegre block of West Garo Hills was included in the study. Primary data was collected from 300 married women aged 16 to 40 years. Findings reveal poor quality education as a significant factor leading many adolescents to drop out of school and subsequently opted for early marriages. Moreover, premarital sexual relationships and permissive parenting styles are other identified contributing factors. Cultural norms and societal expectations also shape marriage practices, with marriage often perceived as a pathway to economic support. The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions addressing education, reproductive health, parenting, and socio-economic disparities to empower adolescents in making informed decisions about their futures. Efforts to improve educational quality, enhance access to reproductive health services, and promote positive parenting practices are crucial in tackling the pervasive issue of early marriage in rural communities like Meghalaya.

Keywords: early marriage, rural women in Meghalaya, socio-economic disparities

Introduction

Early marriage, characterized by union before the legal age of 18, remains a deeply entrenched socio-cultural phenomenon in rural communities globally, including Meghalaya, India. Its pervasive presence significantly impacts the physical, intellectual, psychological, and emotional well-being of both girls and boys, often curtailing educational opportunities and inhibiting personal growth. Particularly for girls, early marriage frequently results in premature pregnancy and childbirth. According to UNICEF (2020) [2], approximately 21% of young women worldwide are married before reaching 18, with around 12 million girls under 18 being married each year.

While early marriage is prevalent in various regions globally, it is particularly common in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, as noted by UNICEF (2001) [3]. Despite legal prohibitions and global efforts to eradicate early marriage, it persists as a significant challenge, especially in rural areas where traditional customs hold sway. Various factors contribute to early marriage among rural women, including educational attainment, family size, geographic location, household financial status, awareness of legal marriage age, religious affiliation. Studies such as the one by Lami, Negash, and Eyeberu (2023) [6] in eastern Ethiopia have observed higher prevalence rates among women with limited education, residing in rural areas, and subjected to arranged engagements. Similarly, research by Hossain MdG and Mahumud (2016) [7] in Bangladesh highlighted associations between early marriage and low levels of education and economic status, particularly among Muslim women.

The Northeast region, including Meghalaya, exhibits a higher incidence of child marriage and teenage pregnancy compared to the national average, as revealed by a study analyzing National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data. Meghalaya's teenage pregnancy rate of 7.9% surpasses the national average of 6.8%, underscoring a concerning trend. Moreover, early marriage is considered a contributing factor to child malnutrition in the region (The Shillong Times, 2022) [14], further exacerbating its detrimental effects. Understanding of the consequences of early marriage and teenage pregnancy in Meghalaya underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions informed by an in-depth understanding of socio-cultural, economic, and environmental determinants. Thus, a community-based study within the Garo

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community of Meghalaya was undertaken to identify factors for prevalence of early marriage among Garo women.

Materials and Methods: The study was conducted within the Gambegre block of the West Garo Hills district in Meghalaya, India. From this block, a total of nine villages were randomly selected. To ensure representation from diverse backgrounds, three hundred married women aged between 16 to 40 years, having at least one living child aged between one to six years

were randomly included in the study. Primary data was collected using a structured interview schedule designed to gather specific information from the respondents. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted, involving visits to the households of each participant. The collected data was analyzed using percentage

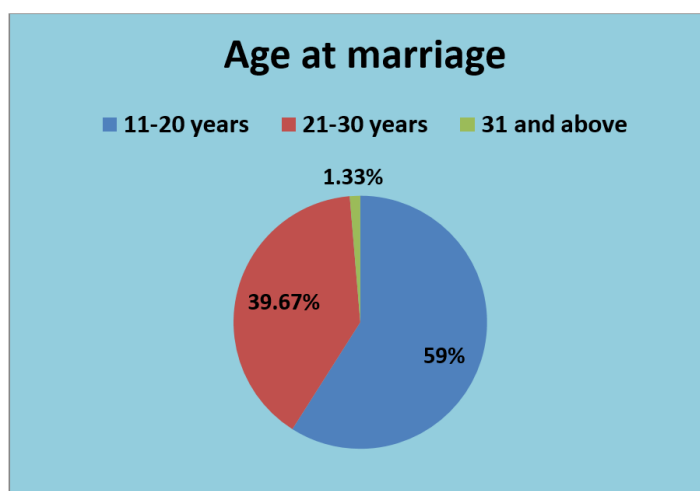
Result and discussion

Table 1: Personal characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Categories	Married women (respondents)	
		Frequency	Percentages (%)
Age in years	16 to 25	130	43.3
	26 to 35	148	49.3
	36 -40	22	7.4
Educational Qualification	Under Matriculation	283	94
	High school	14	5
	HSSLC	3	1
Occupations	House wife	106	35
	Farmer	166	55
	Daily wages	6	2
	Small scale business	13	5
Monthly family income	Any other	9	3
	Rs. 1000-5000	26	8.7
	Rs. 6000-10,000	272	90.6
Use of mobile phones	Above 10000	2	0.7
	Yes	300	100

Table 1 provides an overview of the personal characteristics of the respondents involved in the study. Majority of the respondents fall within the age range of 26 to 35 years (49.3%), followed 16 to 25 years (43.3%), while a smaller proportion comprises aged 36 and above (7.4%). Majority of respondents had an elementary level of education, comprising 94% of the total respondents. A smaller percentage held high school and HSSLC (Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate) qualifications, which accounted for 5% of the total respondents. Majority of respondents were farmers (55%), reflecting the agrarian nature of the community. A

substantial portion also identifies as housewives (35%), while a smaller percentage is engaged in small-scale businesses (5%), daily wage labor (2%), or other occupations (3%). In terms of monthly family income, the vast majority of respondents fall within the income bracket of Rs. 6000-10,000 (90.6%), with a smaller proportion reporting income levels between Rs. 1000-5000 (8.7%), and only a negligible number reporting higher income brackets. Interestingly, all respondents in the study reported using mobile phones, highlighting the widespread adoption of this technology within the community.



Age at marriage and factors affecting early marriage

The distribution of marriages across different age groups, particularly the prevalence of marriages between the ages of 12 and 20, sheds light on the pervasive issue of early marriage within the surveyed population. Early marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18, carries significant implications for individuals, families, and communities. Marriages

occurring during adolescence, within the 12-20 age range raise concerns about the potential risks and consequences associated with early union. Adolescents who marry prematurely often face challenges related to incomplete education, limited economic opportunities, and heightened vulnerability to health risks, including early pregnancy and

childbirth complications.

Factors Leading to Early Marriage

Poor quality education: From the focus group discussion, it was observed that one contributing factor to early marriage among Garo women respondents is the poor quality of education which leads to considerable number of students fail to pass their matriculation or high school exams. Consequently, many of them opt to drop out of school, leading to a pervasive trend of early marriage within the community. Access to quality education empowers individuals by providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions about their futures

Premarital sexual relationship: Another significant factor contributing to early marriage is the prevalence of premarital sexual relationships among respondents. Many individuals during our survey reported not being married despite having children, highlighting the occurrence of unplanned pregnancies outside of wedlock. This situation often leads to societal pressures or personal beliefs that marrying the partner is the best or only solution, even if the individuals involved may not feel fully prepared for marriage. Hence, the presence of premarital sexual relations can act as a catalyst for early marriage, as individuals seek to formalize their relationships and provide a stable family environment for their children.

Parenting style: Another important possible factor might be due to permissive style of parenting. Permissive parenting characterized by a lack of guidance, limited supervision, and reduced communication, can contribute to the prevalence of early marriage among adolescents. Without clear boundaries or discussions about healthy relationships and reproductive health, adolescents may lack the necessary support and information to make informed decisions about marriage.

Socio-economic dynamics: The socio-economic dynamics of village play a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards education and marriage among adolescents, particularly in rural communities where education may not be prioritized. In such settings, adolescents, especially girls, are often more susceptible to early marriage due to limited educational opportunities and economic constraints. An important observation made was that many high school students who failed did not make efforts to reappear for exams. This indicates a lack of prioritization of education or a tendency to lose hope easily among adolescents in these communities. Consequently, without access to quality education or the motivation to pursue it, adolescents may perceive early marriage as a more viable or inevitable option for their future.

Cultural norms: Cultural norms and societal expectations exert considerable influence on marriage practices in rural areas, shaping attitudes towards early marriage. In certain communities, marriage is perceived as a pathway to economic support or security for young women, prompting families to encourage or pressure their daughters into early unions. However, in the present study, there appears to be less parental pressure for early marriage, possibly due to the matrilineal nature of the society. Nonetheless, if there are no prospects for further education or alternative occupations, delaying marriage may not be encouraged. This is because there is a perception that the opportunity to find a suitable partner may diminish, particularly as girls mature. Thus,

cultural norms and societal expectations continue to play a significant role in influencing marriage decisions, albeit in nuanced ways, within rural communities

Conclusion and recommendation

The analysis of factors contributing to early marriage among Garo women reveals a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and familial influences. Poor quality education emerges as a significant driver, with many adolescents dropping out of school due to academic challenges, subsequently leading to early marriages. Additionally, premarital sexual relationships and permissive parenting styles contribute to the prevalence of early unions. Cultural norms and societal expectations also shape marriage practices, with perceptions of marriage as a means of economic support influencing decisions within rural communities. The findings observed the need for comprehensive interventions addressing education, reproductive health, parenting, and socio-economic disparities. Efforts to improve the quality of education, enhance access to reproductive health services, and promote positive parenting practices are essential in empowering adolescents to make informed decisions about their futures.

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