

Early marriage a bane of young girls

Motherhood Forcing Millions Of Reluctant Young Brides To Bury Aspirations

Saira Kurup | TNN

An 18-year-old girl killed her two-day-old son in Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh last week as she feared motherhood might put an end to her dreams of studying further. Sunita Yadav had taken her Class 12 exam on April 2 and delivered a boy three days later. When the baby disappeared from the hospital on April 7, she accused a nurse of stealing her son. But police investigation revealed that Sunita herself had killed her baby.

Such an action, however desperate, cannot be condoned. But the reality is also that millions of reluctant young brides like Sunita are being forced to bury their aspirations and juggle the roles of 'wife' and 'mother' in their

teens. India has the largest number of child brides in the world, with 47% girls married under the legal age of 18, according to the UNFPA. Ranjana Kumari, director of the Centre for Social Research, Delhi, says: "Almost 60% of the girls getting married are 16-17 years old."

Early marriage often has a strong physical, psychological and emotional impact on them, cutting off any chances of educational and personal growth. According to the National Family Health Survey-3, 5.8% of rural girls in the 6-17 age group dropped out of school once they got married.

When early motherhood happens, they are clueless and afraid. "The girls are not physically and emotionally ready for marriage itself. Then, how can a child be caring for an-



other child?" asks Kumari. "That's why India has such high rates of maternal and child mortality. Child birth can be traumatic for very young mothers and their weak bodies deliver babies of low birth weight.

The girls can be overwhelmed by an endless cycle of domestic work, sense of responsibility and even feelings of inadequacy. "Many experience postpartum depression, and there have been other cases of mothers killing their babies, even in Mumbai," says Vibhuti Patel, professor and head of department of economics at SNDT Women's University in Mumbai. She says many young brides also face physical, psychological and emotional abuse in their marriages, and are unable to assert themselves.

However, there's another side to this story too. A study released by Plan Asia regional office early this year, "Asia Child Marriage Initiative: Summary of Research in Bangladesh, India and Nepal," finds that "there are a few

cases, where child brides are able to continue with their education after getting married and sometimes even after having a child. This is possible if the girl herself has a strong desire and also has the support of her parents-in-law." Kumari and Patel agree that there's a small but growing female assertiveness. "Every single girl I meet wants to educate herself first and marry later," says Kumari.

"Many girls are even annulling their child marriages," adds Patel. "They are approaching schools and police for help. Even educated tribal girls are rejecting child marriages. That's why there are more cases of witch-hunting happening even in tribal areas. A backlash of violence against women's assertiveness is to be expected."