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How have the life choices of women in India changed over time?

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Abstract

What do you think you will be doing 10 years from now? Do you have a job? Are you married? Do you have children? Throughout your life, there will be decisions to make that determine your path through life. This life trajectory is often affected by different factors. These factors are different from one country to another. They can include social status, religion, and government policies. Life trajectories can affect the success of a country. That is because they can determine how many people are part of the workforce. They also determine if the country's population grows.

We analyzed survey data to determine how the life trajectories of women in India changed over time. We learned that more women are graduating from high school, so they are getting married later. We also found out that social status and religion affect their decisions about having children and getting a job.

Introduction

You make hundreds of decisions every day. What should I wear today? What do I want for lunch? The decisions you make are often affected by outside factors. You chose to wear a sweater because it was cold outside. You chose your lunch based on what food options were available. The same is true for large decisions that affect your **life trajectory**. Should I go to a university or get a job? Should I get married at 18, or should I wait until I am older? People make choices based on personal preferences. But they are also influenced by culture, religion, and government policies. That means the decisions a person makes are different from one country to another. They can also be different from one region of a country to another.

People's life trajectories can also affect the **economic** success of a country. For example, women often have to choose between having a family or getting a job. If more women work, it can help increase the country's **gross domestic product (GDP)**. GDP is an indicator used to determine a country's economic success. It counts paid work people do outside the home. It does not include unpaid caregiving work at home – which is almost always done by women.

People's life trajectory involves making decisions about joining the workforce (A) and starting a family (B).

India wants to increase its GDP. That means India needs to create more opportunities for women to work outside the home. But what decisions are women making? To answer this question, we examined the life trajectories of India's young women. We focused on decisions women make about going to school, getting married, having children, and joining the workforce. We wanted to see if their decisions have changed over time. We also wanted to figure out what factors might affect the decisions they are making.

Methods

We collected data from four national population surveys that span the years 1992–2016. We compared younger women ages 15–24 to older women (25 or older). We also used data from the National Family Health Survey from 2005–2006 and 2015–2016. From all four surveys, we identified the following information for each age group:

- age at marriage
- age at the birth of their first child
- use of **contraception**
- education level
- participation in the workforce

We then analyzed the data by state, by **caste** (social class), and by religion. This helped us determine which factors may affect women's life decisions.

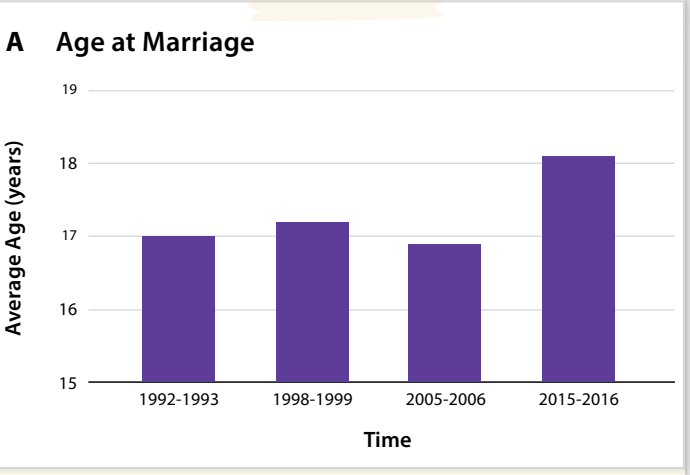
How much did the age of marriage and the age at first birth change between 1992 and 2016?

Results

From our analysis of the data, we found the following patterns across all states.

- The age when young women got married increased to about 18 years (Fig. 1A).
- The age when they had their first baby increased to about 19.2 years (Fig. 1B).
- More women are completing high school.
- The number of women joining the workforce did not increase.

Southern states showed higher ages at marriage and use of contraception. We also found that women in lower castes were more likely to use contraception and have a job. The women who did not finish school tended to get married and have children at a younger age.



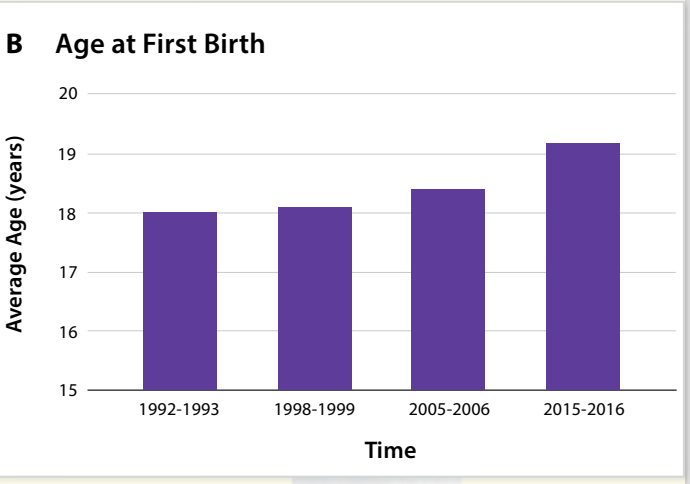


Figure 1:
Changes in age at marriage (A) and age at the birth of their first child (B) for women ages 15-24.

Discussion

Our analysis showed that the life trajectories of young women in India changed between 1992 and 2016. The age at marriage increased. This increase is most likely connected to education. Women who completed high school often got married at an older age. Women who dropped out of school were more likely to get married below the age of 18. They also were more likely to have their first child before 18.

We did not find a link between education and getting a job or using contraception. Those choices were more affected by caste and religion. Women from lower castes are more likely to delay marriage, get a job, and use contraception. Women from higher castes and social status get married and have children early. They do not get jobs but rather focus on motherhood. This is likely because women from lower castes are poorer. So, they have to work to support their families before they can marry and start their own family.

India's potential to change as a country depends on more women having the opportunity to join the workforce. They need to get appropriate pay for their work, too. Programs that promote education and the use of contraception must consider the effects of caste and religion. Also, each state must decide on what changes they need to make. That's because the states are so different. Each state must make changes that meet the needs of the women who live there.

Conclusion

As you grow older, more of your decisions will affect your life trajectory. In many situations, you will have to decide between two options that may be equally important. Should I join the debate team, or should I try out for the soccer team? Should I try to earn money or improve my music skills during school breaks?

Making decisions can be challenging at all ages. Having trouble making a decision? Ask for advice from parents, teachers, counselors, or other knowledgeable adults. They can help you analyze the options so that you choose the one that will be most helpful for you now and in the future.

Glossary of Key Terms

Caste - a division of a society based on differences in wealth, privilege, and career that is passed down from one generation to the next.

Contraception - a method used to prevent pregnancy. Examples include hormonal birth control pills, intrauterine devices (IUDs), condoms, and sterilization.

Economic - related to the money, industry, and trade of a country.

Gross domestic product (GDP) - the value of the goods and services produced by a country in one year. The higher the GDP, the better we say the country is doing economically. GDP includes the value of paid work people do outside the home but not unpaid caregiving work at home, usually done by women.

Life trajectory - the path a person takes through life.

Workforce - the people who are working or able to work.

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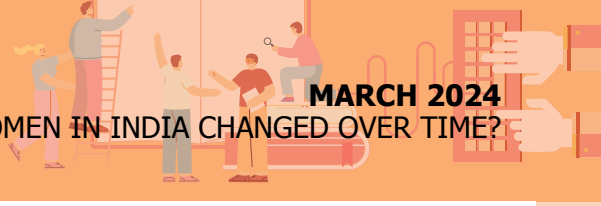

Check your understanding

1. How can people's life trajectories affect a country's economy?

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2. What is the relationship between education and age of marriage?

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3. What factors affect a woman's life trajectory in India?

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4. Does where a woman lives in India affect her life trajectory? Explain your answer.

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5. Predict your life trajectory. Include your thoughts about marriage, having children, education, and jobs.

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