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The Causal Effect of Maternal Age at Marriage on Child Wellbeing: Evidence from India

A. V. Chari, Rachel Heath, Annemie Maertens, and Freeha Fatima*

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Abstract

We use nationally representative household data from India to establish the intergenerational effect of early marriage on a broad set of health and educational investments and outcomes, and to explicate the underlying mechanisms. The empirical strategy utilizes variation in age at menarche to obtain exogenous variation in the age at marriage. We find that delayed marriage results in significantly better child health and educational outcomes. We further analyze a subsample of uneducated child brides to show that the age at marriage matters by itself, independently of its effects via the woman's educational attainment and her marriage market outcome. From a household-decision-making perspective, the effects appear to be due (at least in part) to a reduction in desired and actual fertility as a result of later marriage, which may be associated with a quantity/quality tradeoff.

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