

Marriage Preparation Program: Expressed Needs of Young Adults

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Abstract

Preparing for marriage especially in a time where marital distress is significantly reported with less satisfying marital relationships, it is important to save marriages in a country like India where basics of human bonds are only the characteristic of family life. Divorce rates, violence in marriages, intimate partner violence, and marital rape are more frequently reported for its increased incidence. The rates of divorce have increased over the years. Individuals expecting marriage to provide stability, security and a future need to be responsible for the same and be prepared for it before they get committed to it legally. Marriage preparation programs can have a great influence on the decisions of marriage among young adults. This paper discusses the expectations of youth who participated in a church pre-marriage program organized by a Catholic diocese in India, about the content of the sessions. Semi-structured questions were used to assess their needs. The analysis of the qualitative data shows that the participants across two batches expect more sessions pertaining to their needs. This recommends that the Catholic Church needs to extend the topics covered in the programs based on felt needs as well.

Introduction

In order to bring down the currently increasing rates of divorce and problems in the marriage, mental health professionals, clergy, media and organizations for social cause are advocating for premarital education

programs. It is believed that if couples are prepared to be in long-term marital relationships, divorce rates will decline and marriage can be more satisfying. Pre-marriage education programs are informative and focus on imparting training to the couples ways to nourish and improve their relationship once they are married. These courses also provide individuals or couples with an awareness of potential problems that may arise in their marital life and the information and capacities to prevent or deal with such problems effectively.

Couples experiencing marital distress and conflicts are generally presented with various problems such as higher levels of negative feelings, lack of emotional affection, difficulty regulating their emotions, problematic communication, physical aggression, sexual difficulties along with its impact on their work and other interpersonal relationships. Lack of maturity to handle the ups and downs of marriage, poor coping abilities, difficult personalities, inadequate skills in family management, poor communication skills, poor conflict resolution skills, inability to forgive and forget; rigid ideas, high expectations from marriage and partner; and lack of information about protection of women rights are some of the issues observed among couples who seek marital counseling. Partners in distressed relationships often have different views about each other's behavior, unrealistic standards and unhealthy assumptions about their relationship besides any psychological or behavioral disorders (Carroll & Doherty 2003). Serious physical, mental, and financial impacts are reported among distressed couples and their children (Markman, Stanley, Jenkins, Petrella, and Wadsworth 2006). Stable, happy and secure relationships are the expectations of adults getting into marriage-like institutions and when the very foundation itself goes uncertain, life is perceived as miserable and unmanageable.

Trends in building relationships keep changing either in partner selection, or in the age of getting married, or the reasons for getting married or for staying single or in the involvement of family in partner selection for the marriage of their young ones. Individual autonomy of young adults has made a shift in partner selection from family choice to individual choice (Henry 2010) especially in educated and middle-income families (Gore 1998). The structures in husband and wife relationship also moved towards equality in responsibilities and contributions in the family.

Kerala State in India is reported to have more applications for divorce compared to the other states. The number of divorce petitions filed in the family courts has surged up from 18,500 in 2014 to 19,028 in 2015 (Mathrubhomi 2016, March 14) in Kerala, which is called as the divorce capital of India by media. While in the US the divorce rate was five hundred per one thousand populations, Indian rates of divorce is one per thousand populations (Department of Justice 2010). However, over the past five years, the rates of divorce have tripled in cities like Kochi, Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Lucknow (Hindustan times 2105 Jan 04). The increased divorce petitions in family courts in India indicate that couples are more willing to separate than stay in bad marriages, which was not usual in the culture. This, in turn, indicates the risks of remarriages and single lives.

Domestic violence, marital rape, and intimate partner violence are reported to be critical issues in Indian families. United Nation Population Fund Report (2014) states that around two-third of women with their spouses in India are victims of Domestic Violence attacks. Around 35% of married women in India between the age of 15 and 49 are battered, raped or forced into sex. With the rising number of divorces, many couples are encouraged either by their parents or friends or by themselves, to become aware of what they want from partner and marriage.

Marriage preparation programs

Individuals from diverse cultural, traditional and family values, expectations and life experiences join together in marriage and it becomes important that one gets prepared for a committed relationship. Improved marital quality and decreased distress due to marriage are outcomes of marriage preparation programs (Fawcett 2006). Though a major portion of couples these days spend a lot of time, money, and energy in preparing for a wedding, only a few of them start getting prepared for marriage.

Traditionally in Indian society, family life or marital life and raising of children are done with the advice of the elderly or the extended families and not imparted as part of any school curriculum or formal training (Thomas 2012). Family plays a major role in everyone's lives, as a ground for upbringing children, a support during the crisis, member to rely on, and a place to go back at the end of the day. The family is given priority in everyone's life. But opportunities for dealing with the troubled situation or preparing for anticipatory troubles in proportion

with the contribution that every family makes in people's life are yet to be largely created and accepted (Thomas 2012).

Having known the partner for certain duration of time, or having lived with him/her for a certain period of time before marriage, do not prepare them completely for marriage, as they also don't escape problems of marriage (Silliman 1993). Young adults who seek premarital counseling are reported to have commitment issues (Thomas 2012; Henry 2010) anxiety in partner selection (Carson 2006) and worry about outcomes. The issues reported by youngsters in pre-marital counseling sessions vary from anxiety towards commitment, rebellion against parents, and disagreements with the choices of parents (Thomas 2014). Difficulties in mate selection seem more among people with single parents, role strain, and parent-child conflicts, marital issues of parents and among difficult personality related concerns (Carson 2006; Sengupta 2007; Walsh 2007; Parameswaran 2007).

Sullivan and Bradbury (1997) found that couples with relatively low risk for marital discord were couples attending premarital education while the high-risk couples were not participating. These high-risk couples are in need of the program. High-risk groups are those females who have witnessed divorce or separation of her parents and those males who have witnessed physical aggression in their parents besides parental divorce (Halford, Sanders and Behrens 2001). When couples are forced into marital preparation by parents, clergy, counselors, or friends, they may have a negative perception of the premarital counseling experience (Krista 1998). This suggests that the premarital programs are not reaching the correct demographic. Positive outlook towards marriage preparation programs found if couples perceive that by attending these programs, they improve their communication intimacy and overall marital quality (Hunt, Hof, and DeMaria 1998; Morris, McMillan, Duncan, and Larson 2011).

Faith-based marriage preparation programs

Religious organizations have a long history of mandatory premarital counseling in their requirements for marriage within the church. While the focus of these religious counseling sessions has shifted to a more educational perspective, many couples continue to take part in it because of its mandate nature. In India, Christian Communities or the Church organizes monthly marriage preparation programs. The family apostolate of every diocese has a mission and center that conducts these courses. Programs used in religious institutions are more likely to include spiritual and religious content. Church organized marriage

education programs were known as the Pre-Canacourse pre-marriage course or the marriage preparation course. Couples must undergo this program before they can be married within the Church. Some dioceses give a validity of only up to one to two years of duration to this programs and in case the marriage gets delayed they are advised to attend such a course again. While approaches to Pre-Cana vary from parish to parish, the majority of them focus on marriage as a sacrament, family life, parenting, financial management, sexuality, prayer, confession, penitence, and canon Law on marriage. The church authorities set the topics, which are educational in nature than largely based on the client interest for pre-marriage preparation (Silliman, Schumm, and Jurich 1992; Silliman and Schumm 1989). Rolfe (1985) indicated that clergy reported several purposes of pre-marriage preparation, including understanding marriage in the context of faith, understanding self, increasing realism, assessing strengths and needs, and strengthening the pastor-client relationship. Resource persons consist of priests, nuns, and a few experts and also a married couple to share their experience. Frequently used programs that are based on the perceived needs of clients as determined by religious providers are geared toward marital enrichment, moral teaching, education, evangelism, screening, rehearsal of ceremony, and resource identification as primary areas for premarital preparation and counseling (Jones and Stahmann 1994). There are also sessions in the pre-marriage program of the Catholic Church that involve the parents who get guidance about the entry of new members to the family and exit of members of their family.

Pre-marital education programs are scientifically conducted and evaluated interventions (Halford 2008). These programs give a wide range of training that provides positive findings such as improved relationship satisfaction, conflict management (Carrol and Deherty 2003; Gottman 1994; Stanley *et al.* 1995), empathy, warmth, intimacy, and self-disclosure to one's partner (Carroll and Doherty 2003), better communication skills between partners (Fawlett 2010), positive effect on satisfaction (Halford, Markman, Kline, and Stanley 2003), and stable marriage (Kamey and Bradbury 1995). A meta-analysis done on pre-marriage education program showed that marriage education efforts had moderate, positive effects and it worked (Fawlett 2010).

While many couples and individuals take part in mandatory Church-based programs, other non-religious programs are not much available in India. National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Bangalore in its Centre for Well-Being (NCWB) has started education programs for a long-term committed relationship in the year 2016.

The focus of the training here was mostly on developing a marital bond, getting to know the partner, skills building in accommodative behavior in partners, conflict resolutions skills, and matters related to sexuality. Besides group based programs, individual, and couple based pre-marriage guidance, and counseling services are also provided (The Hindu August 6, 2016).

Content of Pre-marital Programs

Pre-marital programs usually cover topics such as knowledge about married life, information on ways to nourish relationship once they are married, enhancing couple communication skills, and encouraging couples to develop conflict resolution skills (Carroll and Doherty 2003; Murray and Murray 2004) for a satisfactory and stable relationship once the couple is married. Program content areas are prepared by the service providers in several places.

The content is found to be more skills-based or theoretical depending on the provider. Skills-based programs are covered in the discussion of current premarital programs. Theoretical-based programs cover such topics as reinforcement, cognitive restructuring, and attachment theory (Christensen and Heavey 1999). Professional therapists and counselors usually emphasize family of origin and relationship issues (Risch, Riley, and Lawler 2003). Skills-based programs as well as theoretical-based programs still strive to help couples achieve better communication, problem-solving, and interactional patterns. Stahmann and Salts (1993) after reviewing 20 pre-marriage programs concluded that premarital programs were consistently covering similar topics throughout the programs. Some of the typically covered topics included, communication, conflict resolution, roles within the marriage, commitment, financial management, sexuality, parenting expectations (Carroll and Doherty 2003) and financial management (Risch *et al.* 2003).

A healthy marriage is understood in terms of safety that it can provide in the day-to-day life, based on communication, support, and emotional closeness, commitment, and freedom from fear, intimidation or aggression (Markman *et al.* 2006) in addition to the economic advantages couples have. Secure and stable personalities, emotional balance, better communication abilities, problem-solving abilities, ability to accept differences and quality of interpersonal relationships are observed to be associated with individuals in marriages for a long duration. Positive impacts on the physical and emotional health of adults and children are outcomes of healthy marriages (Sayers, Kohn, and Heavey 1998;

Waite and Gallagher 2000). Because of the advantages that marriage provide to individuals in families, promotion of healthy marriage are a significant priority among educators, mental health professionals, religious organizations, government authorities, and the general public. In that context marriage enrichment programs and marriage preparation programs have been developed.

Methods

In order to understand the felt needs of the individuals who attend pre-marriage education course in Bengaluru, South India, a need assessment was carried out at the beginning of the pre-marriage course organized by one of the authorized family apostolate centers of a diocese in Bengaluru, India. This center conducts a pre-marriage course for almost 30 hours from Second Friday to Sunday of every month. The program primarily caters to the catholic couple who are at the threshold of their marriage. On an average, more than 100 young adults whose marriages has either been fixed or going to be fixed by their families attend this session. The program offered in this course have topics such as, life skills, parenting, finance management, Psychology of men and women, Biology of men and women, Sexual morality in marriage, Marriage as a sacrament, Dynamics of marriage, Challenges of living a catholic married life, Marriage- Canon Law and Civil Law, Family problems and solutions, Group dynamics and family catechesis besides providing confession and penitential services.

After taking permission from the organizers, the author carried out need assessment with two batches, which was attended by 101 members in the month of October and 122 members in the month of November 2016. Socio-demographic schedule along with the questionnaire was given so as to understand what they expect from the marriage preparation program. In total, we got data from 209 participants mostly based on the State of Kerala in India. After the introduction of the program, the participants were given the data sheets to fill up in half an hour time. Based on their needs expressed by them, a session was carried out by a professional marriage and family therapist.

Results

The majority of the participants belonged to Christian religion (207/209) and two belonged to Hindu religion. Almost all of them (194/209) reported that they did not have a real interest in participating in this course, however, 15 of them showed partial interest towards attending the program. A similar number of persons also reported that they did not know the contents of the program, felt this course as a religious

program, and probably the reason for the lack of interest. All of them responded that they attended the course more because of the mandatory nature of the program than because of their choice. Out of the 223 participants who attended the program, 209 participants completed the forms. 14 reports were not included, as some of them did not return the forms or returned the forms without filling it.

53 percent (111/209) of the participants were male and 47% female. Females on an average did 16.3 years of education whereas males 16.4 years of education indicating almost all of them either graduates or post graduates. The majority of the participants was software engineers and worked with private corporate companies. In terms of the education of the parents, 52.6 % of fathers of these young adults have education beyond 12th class whereas 50.2% mothers had education beyond 12th class (See table 1).

Table No.1 Social demographic details of the participants

Sl. No.	Items	N= 209 and per cent
1	Gender	Male- 111 (53%) Female- 98 (47%)
2	Education	Female- 16.3 years Male 16.4 years
3	Parents Education	Father- 12.6 Mother- 13.24

31.6% (66/209) young adults reported that they have witnessed either marital conflicts or separation in parents as they were growing up. 18.2% (38) of them were brought up by single parent mostly. More than one-third of the participants (39.7%, 83) reported that they have concerns and apprehensions about sexual aspects of marriage.

There was an open question about what they wanted guidance about which needs to be focused on the pre-marriage programs. The answers are grouped in different subthemes.

Information requirements

90 (43%) participants expressed that they needed information especially about matters related to sex. The interaction in the group revealed that they needed information about dealing with sexuality-related dysfunctions, ways to talk about it to the partner and deal with fear associated with sex.

Developing marital bond

Thirty-five (16.8%) participants asked for skills in developing and managing the relationship in marriage. They have sought help for ways in understanding the partner, making good relationship and develop trust with a partner; handling issues from the partner, maintaining healthy boundaries with extended families and friends. There was also guidance sought to help them learn mechanisms to correct the spouse; some questions were like Is it ok to ask her to change some shortcoming? How many efforts and time was required to develop an adequate relationship with the wife? Is it possible to make my partner/ in-laws constantly happy?

Conflict Resolution Skills

How do I deal with hurt? How to spot and resolve dispute internally? How to deal with conflicts keeping the marriage satisfied? Who should compromise first in quarrels? These were questions asked by 26 (12.4%) participants in terms of preparation that they would like to equip skills with.

Emotional Management

12% (25) of the youth asked to support in handling their emotions, enhancing patience, keeping calm, and abilities to deal with difficult personalities. Nine of them wanted to develop more control over themselves and balance between work and family.

Extended Family Related Concerns

Some of the questions from 11 participants centered around the extended families such as how to maintain a balance between two families handle in- laws, how to deal with the boundary between extended families, and how to deal with complications of nuclear family.

Guidance on roles

There were seven of them who sought guidance for tips to keep the partner and the family members happy and how the wife should behave when they reach the in-laws family. One of the female participants enquired about ways to become a good wife and one of the male participants had enquired about the role of a husband in a happy relationship.

Discussion

The results indicate that there are not a majority of them who actually would need a lot of help and support in all aspects of marriage. The majority can benefit from the educational nature of the program. It is evident from the analysis that though a minority, the concerns they have raised, doubts they have asked are very relevant and appropriate to the new roles they are going to take up. Though there are sessions taken regarding some of the concerns raised by them, it will be necessary to re-look at the expressed needs of the participants and extend the focus of the marriage preparation.

Two categories of the participants' namely high-risk and low-risk groups seem to arise from the study. These categories are in sync with the division created by Ryan (2012). High-risk groups would require more of therapeutic as well as skills-based interventions to get them ready for marriage. Young adults who had witnessed severe fights in their parents, who are brought up by single parents, and who have witnessed separation/ divorce of parents, actually constitute the high-risk group. Though they are in minority, the issues are severe in form so that they are guided and supported. Low-risk groups would be helped by educational and informational interventions. The current scope of the marriage preparation program is limited to informative interventions. Some of the areas that can be covered for this group include conflict resolution skills, emotional management, and skills to develop marital bonds and this would really help the couples to take up the new roles with more confidence. The advantage of programs that would address the expressed needs of the participants (Silliman and Schumm 1998; Duncan *et al.* 1996; Williams 1992; Silliman and Schumm 1989; Silliman *et al.* 1992) would certainly make the participation more voluntary and the benefits will really be high as they get more sensitive and confident towards new roles in life without the program considered to be another ritual before marriage. The program sessions also need to focus on different aspects of marriage to those who value marriage more. In doing so, these programs might be more appealing to an already receptive audience, and awareness of formal forms of preparation may increase their use (Krista 1998).

Sessions on developing a marital bond, conflict resolution skills, emotional management of self, abilities to communicate concerns about sex to the partner, guidance about the commitment towards the new roles and responsibilities in marriage and guidance on helping them to talk about caring the families while maintaining their exclusivity also will help them. It will also be useful for a brief sensitization session

on Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 and rights of the women in the context of increasing domestic violence against women and intimate partner violence.

Conclusion

Premarital counseling will help the couples who are engaged in it to learn more about themselves, their future life partners, and the relationship that they are going to be committed into till death do they part. The study helps in understanding the initiatives of the church in enhancing the well-being of the young adults in a marriage. However, an extension of the programs to the expressed needs of the participants will certainly make these programs more appealing and will do justice to the mission of the church towards the wellbeing of its members.

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