



BEHAVIOURAL DETERMINANTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY IN NEPAL: A qualitative study

2024

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ACRONYMS

CBS | Central Bureau of Statistics

FCHV | Female community health volunteer

INGO | International non-governmental organization

ICRW | International Center for Research on Women

IDI | In-depth interview

KII | Key informant interview

MICS | Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys

NGO | Non-governmental organization

UN | United Nations

UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund

UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund

WHO | World Health Organization

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NEPALI TERMS AND VOCABULARY

Nepali word	Meaning
<i>aiselu</i>	Often called Himalayan raspberry, this is an evergreen berry shrub that is thorny, bares fruit similar to a common raspberry and is native to Nepal and the region.
<i>anushashan</i>	Salvation from the sin one has committed
<i>Asar</i>	Approximately between the months of June and July
<i>bajhi</i>	Infertile
<i>bhote chiya</i>	A popular drink made with salt and butter in the high Himalayan areas and adjoining Tibetan plateau
<i>boilaa</i>	A word used by the Chepang community, meaning infertile
<i>Bratabandha</i>	Also known as the sacred thread ceremony, this Hindu ceremony for boys generally takes place between 8 and 12 years of age but can be performed earlier or later. This marks the first steps in learning the traditional laws, ceremonial roles and rituals of their caste. In Nepal, it is considered the beginning of adulthood.
<i>chautari</i>	A rest stop or gathering place around big trees
<i>chori ta pahuna hun</i>	"Daughters are guests" because they will leave home after getting married
<i>chutro</i>	A shrub native to Nepal and the region that bares medicinal berries (berberis aristate); also known as Indian barberry or tree turmeric
<i>dhami</i>	Traditional healers
<i>diyos</i>	Oil lamps
<i>gahat</i>	Horse gram, a type of lentil consumed in the Terai and hilly regions of Nepal
<i>ghumante</i>	A person who travels frequently, nomadic
<i>gotras</i>	Lineage or clan
<i>janajati</i>	The term used to describe indigenous ethnic groups from Nepal
<i>Jeth</i>	Approximately between the months of May and June
<i>jhakri</i>	Shaman
<i>kaafal</i>	An edible wild berry or fruit found on the kaafal tree, a type of evergreen tree that is native to Nepal and the region
<i>khalde chaepi</i>	"Raw" or pit toilets
<i>khoji khane</i>	From the Chepang community, a ceremony performed during marriage which includes sacrificing a goat and calling the name of the girl's parents. The girl is then called forward and asked if she is participating willingly or under force. If the girl is brought against her will or expresses unhappiness, she is returned to her parents.

<i>khudra</i>	Loose change
<i>koseli</i>	Delicious food items provided by the groom's family to the bride's family as auspicious gifts
<i>kurā</i>	Casual or informal conversation or talk
<i>laagu bhaagu</i>	Bad evil
<i>maiti</i>	Maternal home of the bride
<i>mama chela, fupu cheli</i>	A marriage between the daughter of a maternal uncle and the son of a paternal aunt
<i>manjaram</i>	A leader of the community, specific to the Santhal community in Jhapa
<i>mohani</i>	To create an attraction through the use of mantras
<i>Muluki Ain</i>	The General Code of Nepal: includes criminal and civil codes and procedures. The first <i>Muluki Ain</i> was enacted in 1854 and was largely unchanged until 1963. Other revisions have been implemented since.
<i>nauni ghee</i>	A type of butter
<i>niqab or nakab</i>	A veil for the face where the eyes remain visible, customary within some Muslim communities
<i>palika</i>	The smallest administrative unit in Nepal
<i>prod shikchya/ kishori shikchya</i>	Adult education/teenage girls education classes
<i>Roja</i>	Rumadan
<i>rodhi ghar</i>	Traditionally, a place where community people gather, relax, sing and dance. Adolescents also gather here and are often pressured by others to marry.
<i>kauda and rodi</i>	Traditional folk music and dances from the Magar community
<i>roti</i>	A type of flatbread
<i>Satya yuga</i>	Yugas are eras. Time is believed to be divided into four yugas. Known as the golden age, satya yuga was 4,000 years long.
<i>tanera garne bibaha</i>	Customary in some parts of Nepal and a type of forced marriage, this is when a boy (or man) pulls the hand of a girl (or woman) whom he likes
<i>Vaishakh Purnima</i>	The birth anniversary of Lord Gautama Buddha
<i>Yarshagumba</i>	A caterpillar fungus known for its medicinal properties and found in the mountain regions of Nepal. Young girls are thought to have excellent eyesight for collecting this delicacy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a great pleasure to present, *Behavioural Determinants of Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Nepal: A qualitative study*, by the Nepal Health Research Council, carried out with the support of UNICEF. Understanding drivers and consequences of child marriage including the opinions of marginalized groups is imperative to influence and improve policy for reducing prevalence of early marriage. As such, this study aims to understand the behavioural drivers and consequences of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy among marginalized communities in Nepal.

I am grateful to all the members of the study team for their contributions to this research process and the production of this report. First, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Meghnath Dhimal, Chief of Research Section, Nepal Health Research Council and Principal Investigator of this study, for his leadership and coordination for successful completion of this study. I am also thankful to previous Member-Secretary and Co-Investigator of this study Dr. Pradip Gyanwali for his leadership to conduct this study.

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Dr. Pramod Joshi

Member Secretary (Executive Chief)
Nepal Health Research Council



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even in the face of global achievements, progress toward ending child marriage in Nepal remains inadequate and the rate of decline has been slow. Child marriage has affected 5 million child brides in Nepal, including 1.3 million who are married before the age of 15. Recognizing the pressing need to address this issue, Nepal raised the legal marriage age to 20 for men and women in 2017 and has pledged to end child marriage by 2030.

Despite efforts to combat the practice, the prevalence of teenage marriages and pregnancies in Nepal is widespread, especially in marginalized communities. One study identified that child marriage was most prevalent among those who were illiterate, from Dalit communities and indigenous ethnic groups. Women from these communities tended to be uneducated and lacked a basic understanding of reproductive and maternal health, including early marriage increasing the likelihood of early pregnancy and pregnancy-related complications.

Nevertheless, the prevalence throughout the country suggests a complex interrelation of caste, ethnicity, regionality and religiosity. It is widely understood that economic factors and family relationships drive early marriage, with detrimental consequences linked to limited mobility and education, compromised health, rising adolescent pregnancy and heightened risk of violence.

But what else is at play and at stake? What other behaviors are relevant, and could these be changed to eliminate early marriage? To address these and other questions, UNICEF partnered with the Nepal Health Research Council to develop a study on child marriage and early pregnancy with a focus on marginalized communities in Nepal.

► Methodology

The resulting study, *Behavioural Determinants on Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Nepal: A qualitative study*, employed an exploratory qualitative approach to understanding the behavioural drivers and consequences of these complex issues. An extensive literature review investigating health, education, behaviour and socioeconomic factors provided foundational insights into the situation globally and in Nepal.

Qualitative research was conducted from November 2022 to April 2023 across all seven provinces, with two districts and three marginalized communities from each province. A balanced representation covering the mountain, hill and Terai regions aimed to represent the country's geographic diversity. A purposive sampling method selected 36 participants from each province, totaling 252 participants from all seven provinces.

In-depth interviews were conducted with early married couples, unmarried adolescents and parents. Meanwhile, key informant interviews were performed with community stakeholders including female community health volunteers, school teachers, ward chairpersons and representatives from the Department of Women and Children.

Kuragraphy – an ethnographic approach to engage in informal, unstructured conversations with community members – was conducted with community influencers. The socio-ecological model served as a guiding framework during the analysis of qualitative data, considering various influences and their relationship with one another – including communication between a society, communities and individuals – and recommended actions to prevent harmful behaviors

► Drivers of child marriage

When examining the drivers of child marriage across various Nepalese communities, participants reflected on the interplay of sociocultural, economic and family influences. Interviews with adolescents and parents, for example, revealed that child marriage primarily stems from the need to ensure a decent livelihood and is viewed as a means of survival. Preserving family honour was a significant driver, with marrying young perceived as a means to maintain a family's reputation and approval. Others expressed that marriage is an opportunity, mentioning the potential to travel abroad after marriage.

Educators were a key source of information, offering guidance to unmarried adolescents regarding the appropriate marriage age and provide health advice to those who married early, particularly related to early pregnancy and maternal health.

Economic conditions played a pivotal role in causing parents to compel their children into early marriage. Financial constraints, cultural norms like *mama chela* and *fupu cheli* (marriage between the daughter of a paternal aunt and the son of a maternal uncle). The influence of family dynamics was also evident, with adolescents whose fathers worked abroad feeling pressured to wed early. Other families and communities provoked their children to elope into marriage, due in part to financial constraints or because family members wanted to be free from the responsibility of providing for a child.

Parental bias favoring a son's education is still persistent in many communities. As families prioritize their sons going to school, daughters are often assigned to household roles, such as goat-grazing, with fewer opportunities for academic advancement.

While elopement is on the rise, a decline in arranged marriages was noted around all provinces of Nepal except the Terai, where there is an increase in arranged marriages in part due to parental influence, pressure and cultural norms. Adolescents, filled with curiosity, tend to be eager to explore and sometimes participate in intimate activities. The rise in the use of mobile phones and the internet has also significantly impacted early marriages.

While a high number of participants were aware that child marriage was a crime, a lack of awareness about the legal marriage age also persisted in certain communities, influencing parental decisions.

► Consequences of child marriage

The consequences of early marriage manifest across multiple domains, significantly impacting education, health and family dynamics. *Kuragraphy* findings consistently supported the key informant interviews and in-depth interviews, echoing concerns voiced by parents and grandparents regarding the escalating rate of child marriages. To avoid legal consequences, child marriages are often not registered

Teachers have noted significant dropout rates among students after they have married, with very few continuing their education. Cultural aspects introduced an added complexity to adolescents' educational experiences, highlighting the intersection of cultural norms and educational access. Girls reported feeling shy or uncomfortable due to changes in their appearance and increased responsibilities after childbirth. Cultural norms also impose restrictions on daughters-in-law, prohibiting them from pursuing education outside the home due to conservative values.

Participants noted severe consequences of child marriage including adolescent pregnancy, malnutrition, uterine prolapse, infant mortality and mental health issues. In the Dalit Sarki community of Dolpa, early marriage is nearly universal, with an almost 100 per cent prevalence rate, often leading to early pregnancies. Female community health volunteers reported that the lack of knowledge about contraception, and teachers urged improved health education in school curricula to better address these issues. Some parents from the Dalit and Tharu communities held different views on early marriage and pregnancy, expressing concerns about increased financial burdens when their sons marry early. Similarly, in the Musahar community, early pregnancies and childbirth were known to escalate expenses for maternal and child health care.

Child marriage also tragically leads to suicide. Parents' refusal to accept a marriage, miscommunication when a spouse works abroad and instances of extra marital affairs can also lead to family conflicts, occasionally resulting in suicides.

Despite some communities being well-informed about the legal implications of marrying before 20 years of age, adherence lags. Ward chairpersons and representatives from the Department of Women and Children noted a minimal number of cases filed regarding child marriage. As a result of government regulations prohibiting the registration of marriages before the age of 20, many people do not register their children's births, creating obstacles for their children.

These community-specific issues emphasize the intricate interplay of cultural, social and biological elements that impact the life paths of adolescents, underscoring the necessity for tailored interventions to tackle these challenges effectively.

▶ Conclusion

The behavioural drivers of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Nepal are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with societal norms, economic conditions and cultural expectations. Poverty, discriminatory practices and limited agency of adolescents, especially girls and in certain communities, contribute to early marriages. The influence of family decisions, perceptions of physical attractiveness and the desire for independence also play a pivotal role. Additionally, the lack of comprehensive education and awareness, coupled with societal pressures and traditional beliefs, contribute to the perpetuation of these practices.

Child marriage and adolescent pregnancy have far-reaching and detrimental consequences for individuals, families and communities. These practices perpetuate cycles of poverty and underdevelopment, limiting the potential of young girls and hindering societal progress. The impact on the health of young brides and their children is severe, with increased risks of short and long-term health consequences. Meanwhile, school dropout and pervasive gender norms restrict the education and empowerment of young girls with the financial implications extending to the families.

In light of our findings, we suggest strengthening and establishing community networks and partnerships that jointly work toward ending early marriage. The involvement of girls' clubs, teachers, elders, local government officials, women and youth groups, and community and religious leaders will be crucial. Efforts to address these issues must encompass comprehensive strategies to break the cycle of child marriage and promote the well-being of adolescents. Fostering an environment that supports the education and empowerment of young girls and boys can ensure their rights, health and opportunities for a better future.



INTRODUCTION

► Definition of child marriage

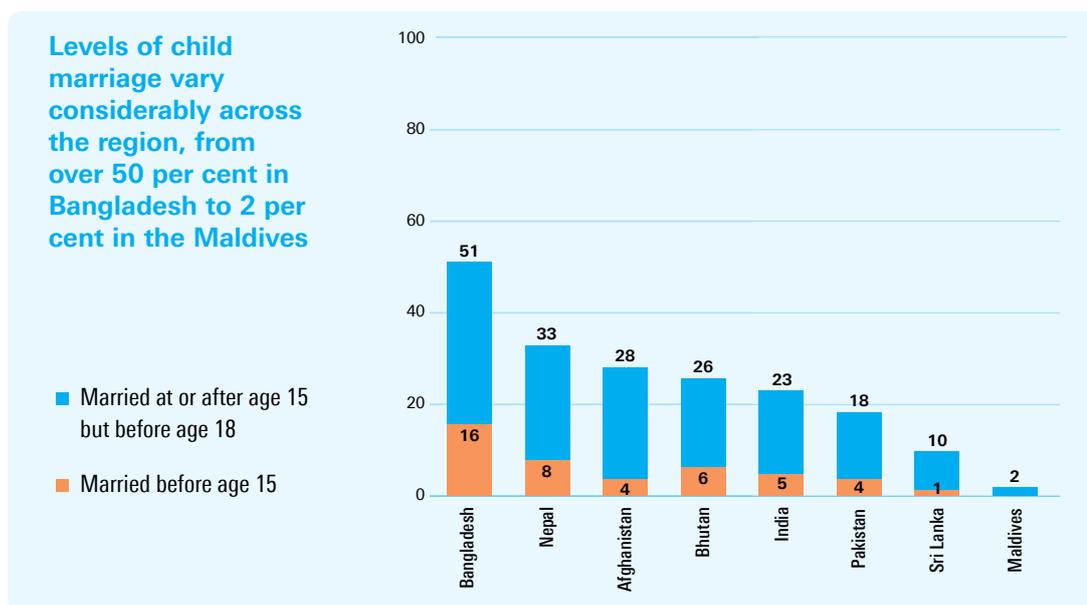
Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child. The term “early marriage” is also frequently used to refer to a marriage between two people who are at least 18 years old or younger and have not given their informed consent. According to UNICEF, the minimum age of marriage is 18 for both females and males(1).

► Prevalence of child marriage

Despite efforts to combat child marriage, Nepal struggles with one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. Globally, a staggering 700 million women have been married before the age of 18(2). An earlier comprehensive analysis of child marriage around the world underscored an additional grim reality: one in three women aged 20–24 was married before turning 18(3). While child marriage has become less common in many places around the world, it remains a significant issue in certain countries, including Nepal.

UNICEF has reported that Nepal is home to 5 million child brides, including 1.3 million who marry before the age of 15(4). An alarming 37 per cent of Nepalese girls marry before they turn 18 and 10 per cent before they turn 15. In South Asia, Nepal has the third highest rate of child marriage after Bangladesh and India. Despite global declines and delayed marriage trends(5), progress toward ending child marriage in Nepal has been inadequate and the rate of decline slow, especially compared to other South Asian nations.

Figure 1 Levels of child marriage across South Asia



Source: United Nations Children’s Fund, *A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia*, UNICEF, New York, 2023.

Rates of child marriage in Nepal vary by caste, ethnicity and religious groups, with most child marriages occurring in lower caste and marginalized populations(5). Some communities have been arranging the marriage of children under the age of 18 for generations(6). More than one-third of young women between the ages of 20 and 24 report getting married before 18, and slightly over 1 in 10 before turning 15(5).

Nepal’s national census in 1991 showed that the average age of marriage for girls was 18 and 21 for males(7). At that time 18 was the legal age for marriage with parental permission and 20 years of age without parental permission. A study from 2012 highlighted that within the marginalized Dalit communities, the prevalence of marriage before the age of 19 was notably high, standing at 65 per cent in Nepal’s hilly region and 87 per cent in the Terai region(8). By 2019, a separate study found that 8 per cent of women aged 20–24 years were married before the age of 15 and 33 per cent were married before age 18. Meanwhile, 2 per cent of men aged 20–24 was married before the age of 15 and 9 per cent were married before the age of 18(9).

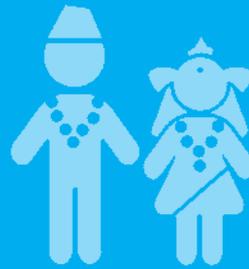
While the legal marriage age in Nepal is 20, the prevalence of teenage marriages and pregnancies is widespread among all caste groups, suggesting a complex interrelation of caste, ethnicity, class, regionality and religiosity(10).The highest incidence of child marriage is among Halkhor and Madhesi Dalits (88.8 per cent) in central and eastern Terai, and Badi (hill) Dalits (80 per cent) in western Nepal. A lower incidence of child marriage is among Marwari (10.1 per cent), who are originally from Rajasthan and live in various parts of Nepal, and Thakali (8.8 per cent) who reside in the Kali Gandaki River Valley, in western Nepal(11). A study conducted in Nepal in 2020 revealed that women in Bagmati and Koshi Provinces tended to marry approximately three years later than their counterparts in Madhesh Province, and two years later than those in Karnali, Lumbini and Sudurpashchim Provinces. Likewise, men in Bagmati and Koshi Province exhibited a similar trend, with their marriages occurring about three years later than men in Karnali and Sudurpashchim Provinces, two years later than those in Lumbini and Madhesh Provinces, and one year later than men in Gandaki Province(12).





Part

1



RATIONALE

While numerous research studies have been conducted to understand child marriage, the exact cause is still unknown. This study endeavours to identify the major social, religious, economic and cultural drivers and consequences of child marriage and early pregnancy in Nepal. Delving into the root causes behind the practice of child marriage can illuminate the profound impact these practices have on the lives of girls, boys and their communities. An examination of livelihoods, family dynamics, reproductive health, legal consequences and other aspects of the culture and environment can unearth information to guide strategies that mitigate child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. New insights can also contribute to well-targeted advocacy that encourages preventive measures, as opposed to punitive approaches, and prioritizes the well-being of Nepal's young population.

► Statement of problem

The persistence of child marriage in Nepal, with over one-third of young girls marrying before the age of 18, has led to adverse impacts on their health, education and overall well-being(13). This widespread practice contributes to a cycle of poverty and perpetuates gender inequality, ultimately impeding the nation's socioeconomic progress. Simultaneously, the high prevalence of adolescent pregnancies compounds these challenges, subjecting young girls to heightened health risks and constraining their personal and professional development opportunities.

The persistent concern about early marriage in South Asia, particularly in Nepal, is evident in the various data that were reviewed. Child marriage and early pregnancy pose multifaceted threats to young girls and boys, including economic stability, physical and mental health, and social concerns. Despite noteworthy initiatives at the national and international policy levels, the continued prevalence of early marriage highlights a gap between policy intentions and practical outcomes. In this context, the study's significance lies in its capacity to uncover the fundamental behavioural determinants that contribute to the persistence of early marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Nepal.

► Research questions

- What are the behavioural drivers (cultural, educational, religious and socioeconomic) for child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Nepal?
- Why is the prevalence of child marriage high among marginalized communities in Nepal?
- What are the social, health and legal consequences of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy?
- How can we decrease the prevalence of early marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Nepal?

► General objective

The main objective of this research is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Nepal, taking into account the social, health and legal implications. Research on child marriage in the last 10 years has evolved to provide a better understanding of the types and forms of child marriage(14). The general objective of the study is to identify the behavioural drivers and consequences of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy among marginalized communities in Nepal.

► Specific objectives

- To explore behavioural drivers (cultural, religious and social) norms for child marriage and adolescent pregnancy among marginalized communities in Nepal
- To explore gender roles for child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Nepal
- To explore the impact of policy shifts, especially on the minimum age of girls and on child marriage and early pregnancy in Nepal
- To explore the attitudes, knowledge and practices of the legal age of marriage and adolescent pregnancy among marginalized communities in Nepal
- To explore the social, health and legal consequences of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy among marginalized communities in Nepal





Part 2



LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review conducted by the research team drew from a diverse array of sources, statistical data, prior research publications and corroborating media materials. The findings indicate that the prevalence of child marriage in Nepal cuts across regions and religious traditions and is largely driven by economic factors, gender discrimination, traditional social norms and a lack of law enforcement(15). The consequences are closely connected: limited physical and social mobility, diminished education opportunities, compromised sexual and reproductive health, and increased risk of intimate partner violence(16).

► Laws related to child marriage

Historically, communities in Nepal have adhered to customary practices related to marriage, particularly early marriages. One prevalent practice in Nepali society was the arrangement of marriages by parents for their daughters upon the onset of menstruation. Since declaring child marriage illegal in 1963 with the enactment of the General Code (*Muluki Ain*) there has been a marked shift in how child marriage is viewed. The General Code, for the first time, legalized marriage based on age: with parental consent, women could marry at 18 and men could marry at 20.

When marriage before the age of 18 was declared a fundamental violation of human rights, the Government of Nepal responded by passing the Marriage Bill in 2011. This bill defined child marriage for girls younger than 18 years of age and boys younger than 21. Today, the prohibition of early marriage is guaranteed by the 2015 Constitution of Nepal and the National Civil (Code) Act, 2017, which amended the minimum age of marriage to 20 for both women and men(18–21).

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Government of Nepal has taken additional measures to protect children from the harmful effects of child marriage. The National Strategy to End Child Marriage in Nepal, adopted in 2016, envisions a nation that is free from child marriage. This strategy aims to provide an overarching policy framework to promote legal accountability(21). The government also established the Ministry of Women in 2016, intending to achieve Sustainable Development Goals and targets 5.3 and 16.2 and eradicate early marriage by 2030.

Several laws provide for punishing and responding to child marriage including the Criminal (Code) Act (2017, 2074*); State Criminal Code, 2017 (2074*); State Criminal Procedure

Code, 2017 (2074*); and the Act Relating to Children, 2018 (2075*). In addition, the National Children's Policy identifies child marriage as a barrier to children's rights: strategy 8.9 stipulates and suggests a collaborative approach involving the government, development partners and community-based organizations to curb early child marriage(22).

While Nepal has recognized the urgent need to tackle the high rates of child marriage by amending the legal marriage age to 20 for both women and men(5), given the continued high prevalence of child marriage, the country requires strengthened application and enforcement of the nation's protective policies.

► Types of child marriage in Nepal

How adolescents enter into marriages is important to measure. Child marriage in Nepal takes many different forms, including traditional marriages, circumstantial marriages, love marriages and elopement.

Traditional child marriages in Nepal can include arranged marriages, are often nonconsensual, even forced, and involve practices such as dowries, leading to significant spousal disparities. These unions are fueled by gender norms that emphasize girls as future mothers and child bearers, while stigmatizing premarital sexual behavior and pregnancy. Factors related to traditional marriage are particularly prevalent in Southeast Asia, and policymakers have focused on this form of marriage due to its recognition as a human rights violation.

Circumstantial child marriages often occur without the girl's consent and are driven by unintended pregnancies or sexual violence. This type of marriage takes place within societies that strongly disapprove of extra marital pregnancy or sexual activity, forcing girls into unions to avoid social consequences.

*Denotes the year in the traditional Nepalese calendar.

Love marriages, usually initiated by peers and based on mutual consent, may arise in response to intended or unintended pregnancies or conservative norms. Love marriages and subsequent elopement can be attributed to the pervasive presence of technology such as mobile phones, the internet and television. This form of child marriage underscores the agency of girls in choosing their partners.

► Drivers of child marriage and early pregnancy in Nepal

In Nepal, child marriage is largely driven by economic factors, a lack of educational opportunities, gender discrimination, social norms, tradition, the protection of girls' sexuality, disparities in the law and a lack of law enforcement(23). The social status of a prospective groom and honour and the prestige of a bride's family also contributes to the persistence of child marriage in society(24).

Parents and guardians who experience apprehension when their daughters reach grades 8 or 9 play a significant role in their children and adolescents agreeing to early marriage. Concerns stem from parent's perceived lack of control over their children, exacerbated by factors such as limited access to education and adherence to traditional customs. The United Nations Development Fund for Women shed light on the influences of cultural, religious and social practices that prompt parents to marry off their daughters at a tender age, often followed by a sense of complacency. Prevalent clichés, such as *chori ta pahuna hun* ("daughters are guests" because they will leave home after getting married), along with the perception that it becomes increasingly challenging to find suitable partners for older girls, perpetuates malpractice under the guise of religious and social values. Such practices encourage parents to expedite their daughters' marriages before they reach puberty, attributing it to an act of parental salvation, among other motivations(25).

A quick reaction research study conducted by Voluntary Service Overseas in four rural areas served by Sisters for Sisters addressed the pressing issue of early marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Nepal, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic lockdown, interviews with girls revealed 89 per cent experienced increased pressure to perform household chores and agricultural work at the expense of their education. Alarming, 11 out of 152 girls reported getting married during this period, indicating a noticeable rise compared to a typical three-month period(18).

Low levels of literacy, peer pressure and community beliefs can further compound the pressure to marry children early. Complex familial relationships, large families and the need for additional household resources play into parents' and adolescents' decisions to marry or agree to marry young. Financial constraints may also force parents to send their children away from home(26). Generational bonds also play a part, as grandparents express a desire to have and engage with grandchildren. Other motivations for marriage include addressing sexual desires, preserving social status by avoiding inter-caste unions, and adhering to societal norms that advocate for early marriage after the onset of a girl's menstruation(27).

► Consequences of child marriage and early pregnancy in Nepal

The repercussions of child marriage are grave with consequences impacting the health and lives of women and their children. Child marriage is known to limit physical and social mobility; reduce autonomy in decision-making within and outside the household; increase the likelihood of self-harm and suicide; compromise sexual and reproductive health; and increase the risk of intimate partner violence(1) Viewed from a sociological standpoint, child marriage

yields isolation from family and friends, restricts social engagement, diminishes educational opportunities, and promotes susceptibility to labour dependency. These pose significant threats to personal, societal and national development, prosperity and stability(3).

Health factors are a major concern related to early marriage. As adolescent pregnancy rates increase in developing countries, the risk of adverse health outcomes for mothers and infants also rises(29). Women who married before the age of 14 are more likely than those who married at 18 or older to experience stillbirth, miscarriage and prenatal and postnatal complications(20). The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights raised a compelling argument in a study on forced marriage as a human rights violation underscoring that girls coerced into early marriages often face the consequences of premature pregnancies. This leads to dire health impacts because their bodies are not adequately developed to support pregnancy and childbirth(30).

Adolescents who engage in early child marriage may also be more prone to domestic violence, poor mental health and malnutrition. Limited access to contraception and health care is partly to blame. These negative effects may impact their children, with their daughters potentially marrying young(34). Women's health is further impacted by poorer socioeconomic positions and lower education, attributes that typically accompany child marriage. Disturbingly, one in three girls experience violence from their spouse, with every sixth girl enduring physical abuse(5).

Economic and social consequences are another major concern related to early marriage and pregnancy. The *Economic Impacts of Child Marriage* report, released in June 2017, indicates that child marriage will cost

developing countries trillions of dollars by 2030(30). Prohibiting child marriage could raise women's projected earnings and household welfare. It could also encourage women to have fewer children and have them later in life. Reducing and ending child marriage could have a significant and favourable impact on the educational attainment of females and their offspring(31). According to World Bank estimates, annual welfare gains from slower population growth could exceed US\$500 billion by 2030. This means the advantage of decreased fertility would amount to over US\$1 billion in Nepal, making child marriage an economic and social priority.

Access to education is deemed an essential right in Nepal's Constitution(32), yet studies indicate that married girls' participation in education is extremely low with only 31.2 per cent of girls aged 15–17 years attending school (33). An intrinsic correlation between education and marriage underlies the belief that girls attending school are less likely to get married earlier than those who have dropped out or have never attended school. Further, early marriage has been associated with dropping out of school or not participating in education, and girls who are not in school may be more likely to get married at a younger age(26). One study in 2019, published in the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, challenged the conventional notion that school attendance determines the timing of marriage. Instead, it found that marriage often dictates the duration of schooling for girls: families in Nepal keep girls in school until a suitable match is found for them(35). This suggests that education can act as a transformative force, empowering girls to break the cycle of poverty, actively engage in their communities, and make informed choices about their sexual health(36).



► Programmes being implemented in Nepal to empower girls and address child marriage

A mixed-methods study from 2022 highlighted the concerted efforts against child marriage in Nepal, driven by concerns over the detrimental physical and mental health effects on those who marry early(37). Two of the country's provinces have set up girl-focused social protection

programmes to address the discriminatory gender norms that continue to impact the lives of girls and women in Nepal, including early marriage, school retention, sex-selective abortion, and gender-based violence at home, in school and in the community. Notably, Madhesh Province has launched *Beti Padhau Beti Bachau* (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter), and Karnali Province has rolled out *Bank Khata Chhoriko Suraksha Jivan Variko* (Bank Account of Daughter for Her Security Forever)(26).





Part

3



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I. STUDY DESIGN

An exploratory qualitative research design was employed for this study, drawing from existing literature on early child marriage and adolescent pregnancy concerning the behaviours, economic factors, health, education and social factors at play. Exploring this information offered insights into child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Nepal before the fieldwork was conducted.

► Building on the socio-ecological model

The socio-ecological model is a framework for prevention that considers various influences and their relationship with one another. It takes into consideration aspects of communication between a society, communities and individuals. Using this framework provides a way to comprehend the variety of conditions that expose or protect individuals from experiencing or committing harmful behaviours. The model's

interlocking rings (see *Figure 2*) serve as an illustration of how variables at one level affect variables at other levels. The model also recommends that to prevent harmful behaviours and aid in the clarification of these elements, actions must be taken simultaneously at several levels of the model. In Nepal, this strategy has a higher chance of sustaining preventative efforts over time and having an impact at the population level (38). As such, the qualitative research and analysis was modeled after this framework.

Figure 2 Socio-ecological model



► Study sites

To ensure a balanced geographical representation covering the mountain, hilly and Terai regions of the country, the study was

conducted in all seven provinces of Nepal. Two districts and three marginalized communities were selected from each province to account for the majority of child marriages that take place in marginalized and lower caste communities (39).

TABLE 1: Study sites

S.N.	Province	District	Municipality/Rural Municipality	Community
1	Koshi	Jhapa	Gauriganj <i>Rural Municipality</i>	Santhal
				Gangai
		Ilam	Sandakpur <i>Rural Municipality</i>	Gurung
2	Madhesh	Dhanusha	Janakpur <i>Sub-metropolitan</i>	Chamaar
				Muslim
		Mahottari	Ekdara <i>Municipality</i>	Musahar
3	Bagmati	Dhading	Benighat Rorang <i>Municipality</i>	Tamang
				Chepeng
		Chitwan	Bharatpur <i>Sub-metropolitan</i>	Bote
4	Gandaki	Gorkha	Barpak Sulikot <i>Rural Municipality</i>	Baram
				Dalit (Bishwokarma)
		Tanahu	Rishing <i>Municipality</i>	Magar
5	Lumbini	Pyuthan	Pyuthan <i>Municipality</i>	Gharti Magar
				Badi
		Dang	Ghorahi <i>Sub-metropolitan</i>	Chaudhary
6	Karnali	Dailekh	Bhairavi <i>Municipality</i>	Raute
				Dalit (Sarki)
		Dolpa	Tripurasundari <i>Municipality</i>	Kham Magar
7	Sudurpashchim	Achham	Rumaroshan <i>Rural Municipality</i>	Dalit
				Chhettri
		Kailali	Dhangadhi <i>Sub-metropolitan</i>	Rana Tharu

► **Sampling technique**

Purposive sampling was employed for the selection of the study participants. Secondary data of child marriage were collected followed by the desk review.

► **Sampling sites**

Three marginalized communities and 36 participants were selected from each province resulting in a total of 252 participants from all seven provinces.

From each community, in-depth interviews were conducted with two married couples, two parents and two unmarried adolescents/ friends. Likewise, key informant interviews were conducted with one ward chairperson, and one representative from the Department of Women and Children (a department within the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens). To represent the community, one government school teacher and one female health community volunteer was selected.

*Kuragraphy*** was carried out with community influencers including astrologers, faith leaders,

police, senior citizens, traditional healers and village chiefs. All interviews were conducted ethically: researchers obtained participant consent and adhered to health research requirements in Nepal.

Sample sizes were based on the theory of information saturation. Saturation in qualitative research took place through the course of interviewing (or observation). As more participants were interviewed, researchers noticed similar themes repeating, until new ideas, opinions, patterns or themes were exhausted. The researchers themselves identified data saturation throughout interviewing (or observation).

► **Study participants**

Participants were carefully selected for the different methods of data collection (see *Table 2*).

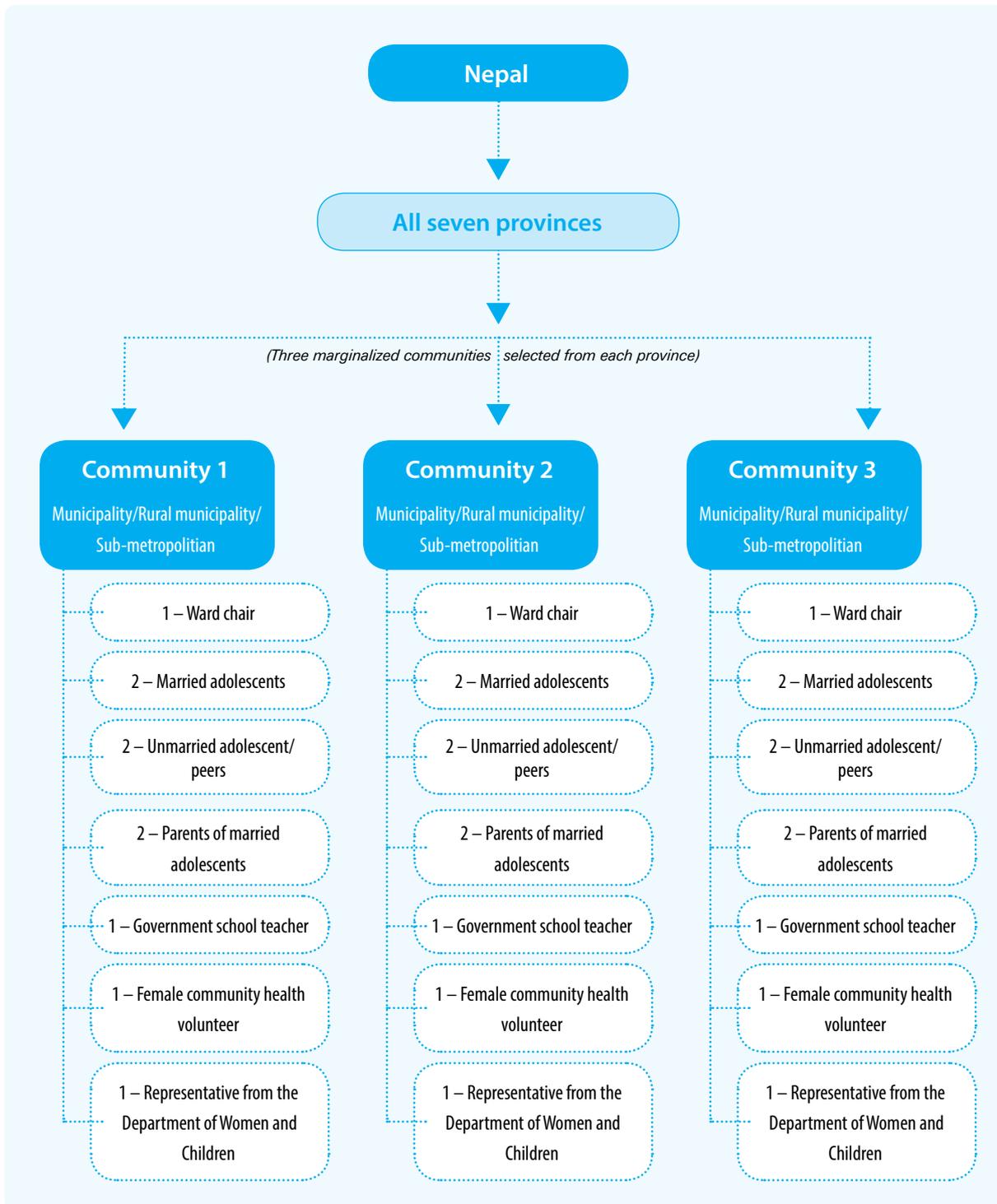
** *Kuragraphy* – derived from the Nepali word, kurā, which means casual/informal talk – is an ethnographic method for data generation. Researchers collect information on a topic or theme through unstructured, unscheduled conversations with people in their natural settings.

TABLE 2: Study participants

Type of interview	Participants
In-depth interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Couples from each palika* who married at a young age Parents of the adolescents who married at a young age Unmarried adolescents/friends of the same community
Key informant interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female community health volunteers Government school teachers Representatives from the Department of Women and Children (under the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens) Ward chairpersons
<i>Kuragraphy</i>	<p>Community influencers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Astrologers Police Religious leaders Senior citizens Traditional healers Village chiefs

*A palika is the smallest administrative unit in Nepal.

Figure 3 Sampling sites



► Inclusion criteria

- Married/unmarried adolescents (12–23 years of age) from the selected marginalized communities
- Participants from local marginalized communities residing for at least six months preceding the study
- Those who are mentally unfit to participate in the study were not included

II. DATA COLLECTION TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

The procedure for data collection tools and techniques were further divided into following sub-groups.

▶ Selection orientation and training of research team

Several factors were considered when selecting the research team, including gender inclusion, backgrounds in public health and social science, and language proficiency. A six-day context-specific training on qualitative research – including data collection procedures, data transcription, data translation, data coding and analysis – equipped the research team with skills to conduct the research. Field researchers and enumerators received a three-day orientation focused on the questionnaire’s purpose and objectives and to familiarize participants with the goals of the study.

▶ Data enumerators

Data enumerators with academic backgrounds in anthropology, nursing, public health or sociology were chosen to assist with this research.

▶ Guidelines for qualitative data collection

Guidelines for qualitative data collection were developed in collaboration with experts and technical working groups. Qualitative data collection employed a purposive sampling technique from marginalized communities.

▶ Sampling and interview methods

Qualitative in-depth interviews, based on the socio-ecological model, were conducted among married adolescents, parents of married adolescents and unmarried adolescents/friends. Key informant interviews were conducted with female community health volunteers, government school teachers, representatives

from the Department of Women and Children and ward chairpersons. Couples that married as children were identified with the help of female community health volunteers and ward chairpersons.

▶ Demographic variables

Data that was collected included geographic and demographic variables such as age at marriage, caste, disability, economic status, education, ethnically marginalized groups, ethnicity, family size, first childbirth, gender, religious minority and spousal information.

▶ Identification of high-prevalence areas

Cluster areas among marginalized groups with a high prevalence of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy were verified, in consultation with local governments.

▶ Data collection procedures, communication and logistics

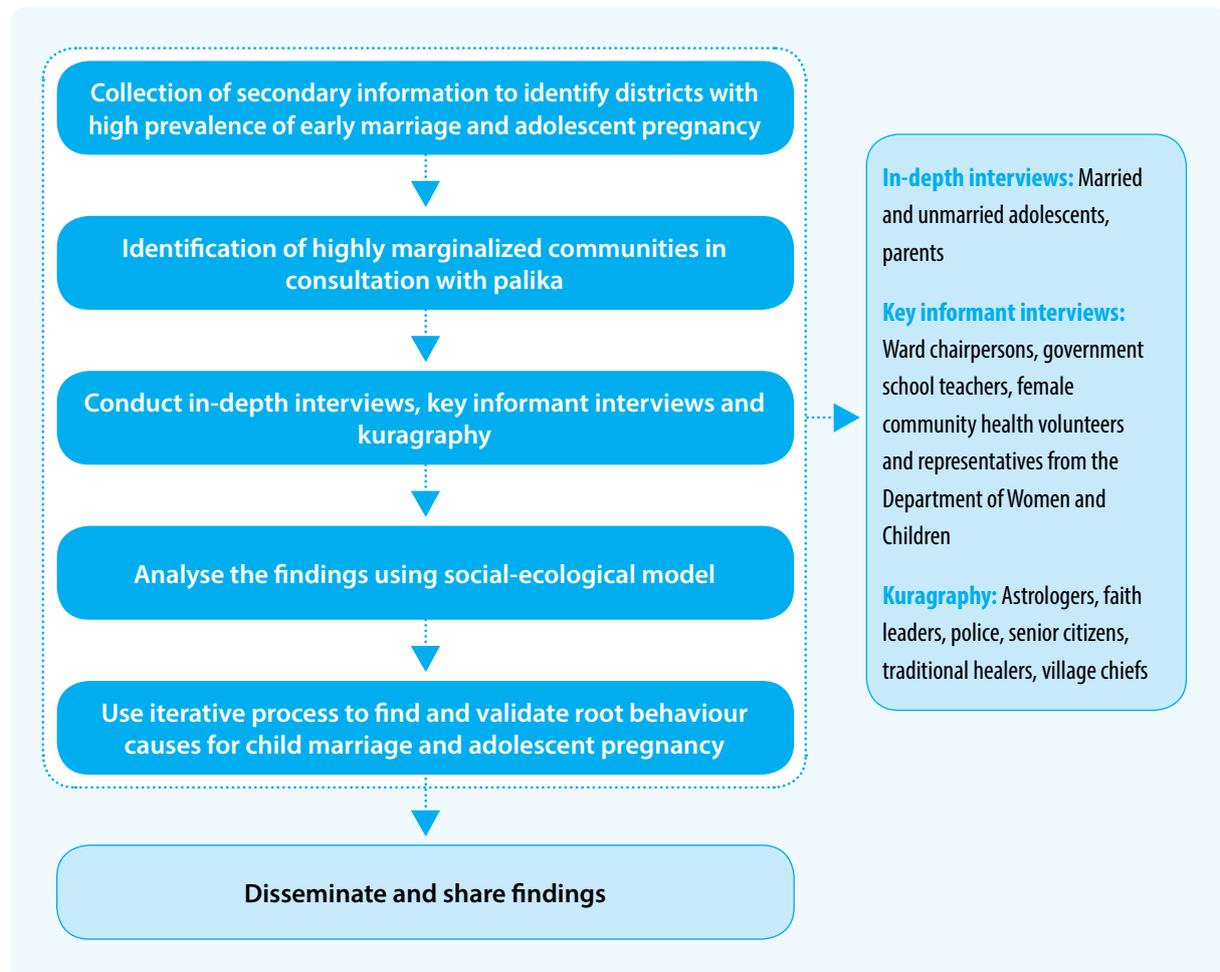
Prior to the data collection, the interview questions were piloted and field-tested in Kagati Gaau in Nuwakot District, Bagmati Province, an area with a high prevalence of child marriage and conveniently located outside of Kathmandu. Following the pilot exercise, field researchers met with their supervisors to discuss their experiences and challenges. Feedback from this field-testing process resulted in adjustments to the language used in the survey instrument.

Data collection was planned for 15 days in each province. A letter from the Nepal Health Research Council was issued to the selected municipality’s offices, outlining the project details. A copy of the signed letter was also given to each researcher so they could present it to relevant officials and, if needed, petition for assistance. Interviews were recorded using a tape recorder and each team was given a power bank and batteries to ensure the functionality

of mobile phones and tape recorders. In case of recorder malfunction, researchers had notebooks to take notes. WhatsApp and Viber groups facilitated communication and monitoring among the researchers throughout

the data collection process. All field researchers, project coordinators and supervisors were added to the WhatsApp group, to enable the survey management team to track the activities of each selected area of the province.

Figure 4 Data collection procedure



► Validity and reliability of tools

Interview guidelines were developed following a rigorous literature review and in collaboration with experts from the Ministry of Health and Population and academia. The Steering Committee and Technical Working Groups of the project provided feedback on face validity and content validity of the tool.*

* Face validity is the extent to which a test appears to measure what it is intended to measure. Content validity is the extent to which a measurement instrument, adequately covers the intended content domain it is intended to measure.

Qualitative interview guidelines developed in the English language were translated into Nepali. Forward and back translations of the tool were conducted for validity and reliability. Researchers were able to adjust the language they spoke, allowing participants to share freely. For example, interviews generally took place in Nepali. However, some participants were more proficient in Maithili or Tharu and researchers fluent in the local languages were on hand to conduct interviews.

▶ Study duration

The study was conducted over a period of six months, from November 2022 to April 2023.

▶ Limitation of the study

Because of the sensitivity around child marriage, including cultural taboos, it is assumed that some participants were hesitant to say too much and did not fully reveal their difficulties.

▶ Supervision and monitoring

In order to ensure that standard procedures were maintained to collect the data, the core research team frequently monitored and supervised the data collection in the field. An update of the field-level activity was performed daily. Secondary data was checked regularly for any inconsistencies. To ensure the highest quality of research was collected, the principal investigator, co-principal investigator and UNICEF teams supervised the qualitative study process in seven provinces.

▶ Data management and analysis

Information obtained through the in-depth interviews and key informant interviews was simultaneously transcribed and translated into English by the enumerators who conducted the interviews. The research officers checked the accuracy of the transcriptions by re-reading them while listening to the audio recording of the interview. Some translations were re-checked for accuracy by the research officer. All inaccuracies in the transcripts and translations were discussed to pinpoint the reason for differences.

Individual participant's biographies and stories, field observation notes, reflections from the researchers, and primary data from the hospitals and health care institutions complemented the key informant interviews and in-depth interviews.

The research team and qualitative experts independently reviewed and segmented the data with meaningful segments manually coded by

the researchers. Relevant themes and codes were then developed and discussed by the researcher. The research team also conducted continuous comparisons of the developed codes, concepts and themes. As part of the consultation, experts from the Ministry of Health and Population and academia were involved in this process.

During analysis, deductive reasoning was applied to the concepts of the socio-ecological model (i.e., individual, interpersonal, community, organizational and policy level) to test existing theories or hypotheses against empirical evidence collected during the research process; apply the concepts of the socio-ecological model and interpret the study findings; identify themes related to each level of influence and explore how these factors interacted to shape the behaviour under study.

By systematically applying the framework of the socio-ecological model, conclusions were drawn about the nuanced interplay between individual characteristics, social relationships, community environments and broader societal influences on health behaviours, providing insight to inform targeted interventions and policy efforts aimed at promoting positive health outcomes.

▶ Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of the Nepal Health Research Council. The purpose of the study and the procedure were well-explained and written informed consent was gained before starting the data collection. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time during the interview process. Moreover, participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidential treatment of their responses. Individual consent was also taken for photography and videography, according to the approved protocol by the Ethical Review Board of the Nepal Health Research Council. All the information gathered was kept confidential, and the consent forms were coded for identification.





Part 4



FINDINGS

I. FINDINGS FROM THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS AND KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

This study delved into the behavioural determinants of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in marginalized communities in Nepal. Taking a comprehensive approach to data collection enabled researchers to gain insights from various perspectives in the communities, from the individual to the policy level. Incorporating these diverse perspectives allowed for a more holistic understanding of the complexity related to these issues.

The findings draw from interviews conducted in the marginalized communities in the seven provinces. While *kuragraphy* allowed for informal conversations with a range of people in each community, the formal interviews included:

In-depth interviews (IDI):

- 84 married adolescents
- 42 unmarried adolescents
- 42 parents

Key informant interviews (KII):

- 21 female community health volunteers
- 14 representatives from the Department of Women and Children
- 21 school teachers
- 21 ward chairpersons

This section describes the drivers and consequences responsible for child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in the selected marginalized communities in Nepal. Data were analyzed according to the socio-ecological model:

- Individual level: interviews with married adolescents
- Interpersonal level: interviews with family and unmarried adolescents (peers/friends)

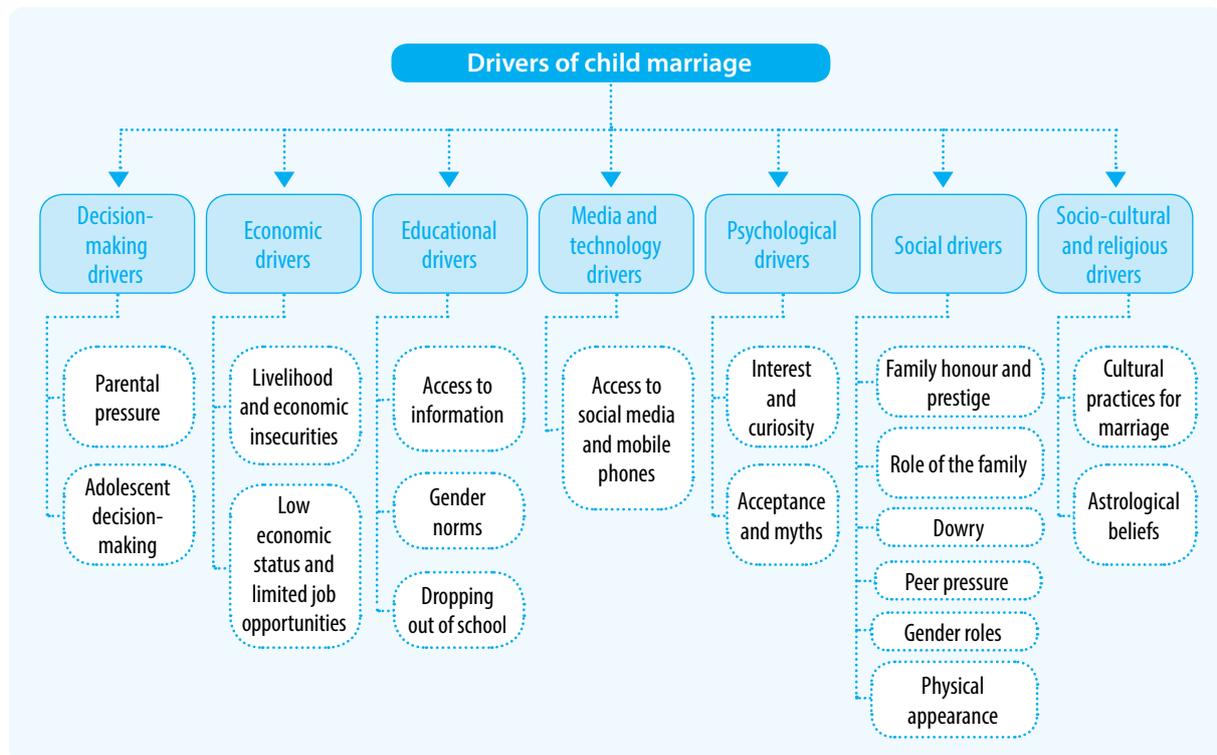
- Community level: interviews with female community health volunteers
- Organizational level: interviews with school teachers
- Policy level: interviews with ward chairpersons and representatives from the Department of Women and Children

The flowchart illustrates the categorization process, which is based on the recurring themes identified during the data review (see *Figure 5*).

► **Drivers of child marriage**

Understanding the behavioural drivers of child marriage is essential for comprehending its impact on individuals. These drivers play a crucial role in influencing early-married couples, and their nature can vary in different contexts. By identifying and analyzing these drivers, we gain valuable insights into the intricate relationship between the range of causes and how they interact within each specific context. This deeper understanding is crucial for unraveling the complexities of child marriage in Nepal.

Figure 5 Drivers of child marriage



1. Social drivers

Child marriage is a complex issue with roots in gender inequity and the idea that women and girls are less valuable than men and boys. Poverty, illiteracy, negative societal norms and practices, and insecurity make such inequality worse. Some of the social drivers examined in this study are summarized in the tables below (see *Tables 4-9*).

1.1 Perceptions of child marriage

Views on child marriage from the various socio-ecological levels are referred to as perceptions of child marriage. The findings

revealed that a significant number of participants were well-informed about child marriage and acknowledged it as a crime. Notably, some participants viewed child marriage as a cultural and traditional practice with a long-standing history. Additionally, a few participants mentioned that child marriage could provide opportunities to travel abroad once the marriage is solemnized. Various levels of society have different perspectives on this, indicating a diversity of perceptions and beliefs surrounding child marriage among the study participants.

TABLE 3: Drivers: Perceptions of child marriage

Individual level	Child marriage occurs at a young age (i.e., under the age of 20), can cause damage to the life of an adolescent and often results in adolescent pregnancy and divorce.
Interpersonal level	<p>Parents reported that child marriage is getting married at an early age, typically before age 20, and is a practice that should be discouraged. Child marriage can result in legal consequences, as cases can be filed against anyone who participates in child marriage (i.e. parents, children, community members, religious leaders). Additionally, marrying at a young age can hinder the physical and mental development of adolescents, leading to physical weakness and mental health issues.</p> <p>According to unmarried adolescents, marriage is a significant societal, cultural and legal event. When this union takes place before the age of 20, it is termed “child marriage”. When a girl and a boy marry at a young age without parental consent, it is also considered child marriage. Child marriage, which involves marrying at a young age, has been associated with adverse health effects.</p>

“Child marriage means getting married at a young age. Those who get married before the age of 20 are considered to have child marriage.”

– *In-depth interview with a mother-in-law from the Tamang community, Dhading, Bagmati Province*

1.2 Honour and prestige of the family

Some study participants asserted that marrying young can appease family members and preserve the family’s reputation and prestige. Similarly,

participants expressed concern for their parents and believed that getting married would bring happiness to them.

TABLE 4: Drivers: Honour and prestige of the family

Individual level	Not marrying young can bring shame to family members. Therefore to maintain the prestige of the family they marry early
Interpersonal level	<p>In Muslim communities, parents often worry about their reputation when their child elopes. This concern prompts them to arrange early marriages for their children, fearing that elopement might lead to adverse consequences. They are apprehensive that unforeseen events could harm their family’s prestige and reputation if their child’s safety is compromised.</p> <p>To safeguard their reputation and protect the honour of their guardians, unmarried adolescents reported that families resort to marrying their daughters at a young age.</p>

“Most often the marriage is done by the families rather than love marriage. The families think that the girls will run away by doing love marriage. To maintain their prestige, the families confined their daughters in the marriage.”

– *In-depth interview with an unmarried adolescent girl from the Muslim community, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province*

1.3 Role of the family and dowry system in early marriage

Participants pointed out that in the Terai, the dowry system is still prevalent. The older the daughter is, the more dowry is needed. In addition, if the economic condition of the family is poor and they are unable to afford their children’s education they would rather have them marry.

In some communities, parents force their children into marriage against their will. In the Chepang community, for instance,

parents who cannot afford adequate food marry their children off at an early age. This allows children to have access to improved meals and livelihoods. There is also a lack of awareness about the legal age for marriage, and certain customs involving marrying relatives, like *mama chela*, *fupu cheli** persist, although to a lesser extent than before. While elopement does occur, it is more common for parents to arrange their children’s marriage.

* A marriage between the daughter of a maternal uncle and the son of a paternal aunt

TABLE 5: Drivers: Role of the family

Individual level	In the Santhal and Gurung communities, individuals are unwilling to stay at home due to frequent fights at home. Conflict at home, often exacerbated by alcoholic parents and guardians, can lead to domestic disputes. Additionally, participants whose fathers were abroad and mothers were the sole caregivers felt pressured to marry early. In one instance in the Chhetri community, a participant's mother eloped with someone else leading the grandmother to expel the girl from the house, ultimately compelling her to marry.
Interpersonal level	In the Chamaar community, stepmothers also force their daughters to marry at a young age. Unmarried adolescents from the Chhetri and Rana Tharu communities said their family members provoked them to elope. Financial constraints and the desire to be free from child-rearing responsibilities led the parents to intentionally or unintentionally encourage their children to elope.
Policy level	In the Dalit communities, guardians at times neglect the well-being of their children and fail to understand the consequences of child marriage. Adolescents elope because they fear their family will reject their relationship.

“Even though we say not to marry before 20 years, the guardians themselves fail to understand and they neglect the well-being of their children. The economic situation may prevent them from pursuing education, and instead of choosing to study, they opt for marriage.”

– *Key-informant interview with a male ward chairperson from Bote community, Chitwan, Bagmati Province*

1.4 Peer pressure

Participants noted that some teenagers face peer pressure when it comes to child marriage. They pointed out that this pressure can lead children to run away, as they may lack a strong moral compass. Participants also emphasized that rapid socialization within the community and beyond makes it easier for

young people to stay in touch with their peers. They also have a glimpse into the lives of almost everyone. Finally, adolescents want to get married when their friends marry; which is also the result of peer pressure. Cases of child marriage were observed in only a few communities.

TABLE 6: Drivers: Peer pressure

Individual level	Children often fail to complete their education due to the influence of their friends. They also engage in activities such as smoking (marijuana) and early marriage. It is apparent that child marriage is influenced by the behaviour and choices of their peers.
Interpersonal level	According to unmarried adolescents, with the exception of the Raute community, child marriage was the result of peer pressure. For example, in the Chaudhary community, peer circles, alcohol abuse and the lack of attention on education were said to contribute to child marriage.
Policy level	In the Tamang community, imitation plays a role in child marriage. Adolescents see their friends getting married with impunity: the community doesn't object and there aren't any observable repercussions so they decide they can do it too. There is also a sense of competition with their friends, causing some to get married.

“Child marriage may be due to modernization. The reason behind it may be their lack of attention to their studies from a very young age, their peer circles or alcohol abuse.”

– *In-depth interview with a 14-year-old unmarried girl from the Chaudhary community, Kailali, Sudurpashchim Province*

“Imitation is when they say, ‘The person in the next house is getting married to someone, and after they’ve done it what will happen if we do?’. Such kind of behaviour is noticed. As the ward chairperson, I questioned some communities about why they married. We separated many of them too. What they say is, ‘Someone is doing it in the neighborhood then why will you stop mine?’”

– *Key-informant interview with a 40-year-old male ward chairperson from the Tamang community, Dhading, Bagmati Province*

1.5 Gender roles

The decision to marry early is influenced by deeply ingrained gender norms and societal expectations. In many communities, males often feel pressured to marry early to fulfill perceived obligations of providing companionship and assistance to their mothers in household chores, while parents

see marrying off their sons as a means to gain additional support for domestic tasks. At the interpersonal level, participants noted that their friends shared a common concern about caring for aging parents, which influenced their desire to marry at a young age. Within the Muslim community, the onset of menstruation is believed to be the impetus for arranging girls' marriages.

TABLE 7: Drivers: Gender roles

Individual level	<p>Male participants noticed their mothers working alone in the kitchen and thought she needed companionship. Others believed there would be no one to look after their family members or help with household and farm work. Most of the participants thought marriage – and the presence of a daughter-in-law – could alleviate these emotional and household burdens and provide support to their parents, and mothers in particular.</p> <p>Female participants thought marriage could bring security, responsibility and fulfilment. Some female participants thought marrying would enhance their family’s prestige and happiness.</p>
Interpersonal level	<p>Parents perceived that a daughter-in-law could help with household chores. In the Raute community, girls get married off if there is no one at a groom’s home that cooks. Unmarried peers observed that their friends felt responsible for taking care of their aging mother and father and wanted to get married early. The practice of marrying a girl immediately after menstruation was considered mandatory by those in the Muslim communities.</p>
Policy level	<p>In the Sarki community, parents feel compelled to marry their sons at a young age and find a bride who can assist in the household chores. This is especially true when households are large and there are older family members and less help at home.</p>

“If you marry too young, it will be considered a sin. Girls can get married after they are over 12 years old. It is a ritual for boys to get married when they are a little older. If there is no one to cook at home, then they get married before menstruation. If there are people who cook at home, then they will get married after menstruation.”

– In-depth interview with a father of a married girl from the Raute community, Dailekh, Karnali Province

“I am talking about this community: if a house does not have a working hand and the house is filled with elderly people and there are lots of house chores, then they are compelled (to find a young bride). I have seen these kinds of compulsions, maybe five per cent (out of the 25 per cent of child marriage cases) of the time”

– Key informant interview with a 36-year-old male ward chairperson from the Sarki community, Dolpa, Karnali Province

1.6 Perceptions of physical appearance

According to participants from the Chamaar, Musahar and Muslim communities, each community has a set of beauty standards or expectations related to the physical appearance of girls. Short, dark skinned and heavy girls are less preferable for marriage than girls who are tall, fair

skinned and lean. In contrast, girls who looked more mature than their age were married off earlier than girls who looked younger than their age. Correspondingly, some girls stated that girls with fairer and white skin were forced to marry at a young age while girls with dark skin said they were ignored.

TABLE 8: Drivers: Physical appearance

Individual level	In the Chamaar, Musahar and Muslim communities, a girl who looks more mature than her age agrees to get married, with her parents' pressure. The fear of not being accepted for marriage later (as she would look more mature) is a factor. Children who are heavy may agree to marry early because they fear they might gain more weight later on, making them less desirable for marriage.
Interpersonal level	<p>Parents in the Muslim community reported that if a girl is fat, it is difficult for her to find a marriage partner. Everyone wants to marry their children at the appropriate (i.e., legal) age but they are afraid that the children might gain more weight; that is why they marry them earlier. Also, if a girl looks more mature after puberty (such as having large breasts) they are forced to marry earlier.</p> <p>According to unmarried adolescents, if someone looks tall, they are considered very tall. Even if someone is mature but looks short then they are kept at home.</p>

“My mother expired [passed away] when I was 9 years old, and I have a stepmom at home. I was fat at the time. She told me I looked huge due to my body and I might get even more fat, so she married me off.”

– *In-depth interview with a 15-year-old married girl from the Chamaar community, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province*

2. Economic drivers

Early marriage is also influenced by economic circumstances such as livelihood, economic insecurities, low economic status and limited job opportunities.

2.1 Livelihood and economic insecurity

Livelihood denotes the means and resources necessary to sustain and fulfill fundamental requirements: essentials like clothing, food and shelter. Child marriage primarily stems from the need to address essential livelihood requirements. The prevailing sentiment among most

individuals is that they opt for early marriage due to their family's precarious financial situation, viewing it as a practical means of survival. This was particularly true in the Badi, Kham Magar and Raute communities.

Parents of married couples often express that they marry off their children at a young age to ensure their daily needs are met. In marginalized communities where poverty is pervasive, families find it challenging to fulfill their basic needs. Consequently, they resort to early marriage, believing that it offers

better access to food, protective shelter and clothing. This trend extends to the community level, where adolescents enter into marriage as a response to family circumstances and meeting their fundamental needs.

School teachers, who interact closely with underprivileged individuals, highlight poor living habits within this demographic. They believe that early marriage presents a pathway to more readily meet basic living standards, particularly in terms of food accessibility.

TABLE 9: Drivers: Livelihood and economic insecurity

Individual level	The primary purpose of child marriage is to meet these kinds of fundamental requirements. The majority of the communities, including the Chamaar and Dalit communities, claimed they got married young because their family's financial situation was precarious, and it was an easy way for them to ensure survival.
Interpersonal level	In the Chamaar community, most parents of married adolescents claimed that they marry their children early to fulfill their daily requirements. Most of the marginalized community falls under the poverty line and they find it difficult to fulfill their daily requirements. So they marry their children earlier to ensure they receive good food, protective shelter and clothing from the spouse's family.
Community level	Adolescents marry due to their family circumstances and to fulfill their basic needs.
Organizational level	Most of the school teachers claimed that the majority of underprivileged people had poor living standards. They believe that if they marry their children early, their basic needs, including easy access to food, will be more readily available.

“Some parents marry their son at a young age so that his wife can collect Yarshagumba easily: young girls have good eye sight for collecting Yarshagumba.”

– In-depth interview with an 18-year-old married man from the Kham Magar community, Dolpa, Karnali Province

“Some may have a lack of food and clothes, so they get married at a younger age.”

– In-depth interview with a 16-year-old unmarried girl from the Badi community, Dang, Lumbini Province

2.2 Low economic status and limited job opportunities

Closely related to poverty, low economic status refers to insufficient resources to fulfill basic needs. Most of the participants

shared that they view marriage as the only practical and viable option in environments where opportunities for further education, employment or other valued occupations are scarce.

TABLE 10: Drivers: Low economic status and limited job opportunities

<p>Individual level</p>	<p>In some communities, such as the Chaudhary and Gurung communities, it isn't easy to get food at home. This motivates adolescents to elope. When the economic conditions of a family are limited and improved living conditions are not possible, adolescents get married early. In the Chamaar community, however, individuals perceive that marrying early would offer less dowry than marrying late.</p>
<p>Interpersonal level</p>	<p>In some communities, such as the Dalit community, parents cannot afford to meet the needs of their children and prefer to go for employment abroad. When there is a lack of good food, education and other basic needs at home, they prefer their children to marry early.</p>

“As there was no work in my house – I had leisure time – I wasn't studying or working. That is why I thought marrying would be okay.”

– In-depth interview with a married adolescent girl from the Dalit community, Accham District, Sudurpashchim Province

“I am a poor guy. The later you marry your daughter, the more dowry you have to give. The earlier you marry them, the better it will be. I am a poor guy, so I gave nothing in dowry.”

– In-depth interview with a father from the Chamaar community, Mahottari, Madhesh Province

3. Educational drivers

In this context, educational factors include access to information about the legal age at marriage, gender norms related to education, and school dropout occurring before and after early marriage.

INGOs are the main resources for obtaining information on marriage. Adolescents in approximately half of the communities have access to information and possess knowledge about the appropriate and legal age for marriage: information that has been obtained from schools, family, relatives and local NGOs/INGOs. Many parents, however, lack clarity on the legal and appropriate age for marriage, despite being aware of the negative consequences of child marriage.

3.1 Access to information

This study revealed that teachers, female community health volunteers and NGO/

TABLE 11: Drivers: Access to information

Individual level	According to the study, half of the participants from the Chhetri, Dalit, Rana Tharu and Santhal communities said that they have information about the appropriate age of marriage and they also know the legal age of marriage. They receive information from school, family, relatives and NGOs/INGOs working in their community.
Interpersonal level	<p>Parents said that they have knowledge about not marrying early but most of them don't know about the legal age of marriage. Some said the actual age of marriage is 18 and some said 25 or 26. Despite having information about the effects of child marriage, they are unaware of the appropriate age for marriage.</p> <p>Most unmarried adolescents and friends of married couples are aware of the legal age of marriage and received that information from school, where they also discussed it with friends.</p>
Community level	Female community health volunteers from the Baram, Dalit, Gangai, Gharti Magar and Gurung communities are well-versed about the legal age of marriage. Some also provide this information to adolescents in the community.
Organizational level	In the Badi, Chaudhary, Magar, Rana Tharu and Sarki communities, teachers are the main resource for providing information about the legal age of marriage. They offer counsel to unmarried adolescents about the appropriate age for marriage. They also offer counsel about health and early pregnancy. According to the teachers, most of the adolescents who attend school are knowledgeable about the legal age of marriage.
Policy level	Ward chairpersons and representatives from the Department of Women and Children report being actively engaged in spreading awareness regarding the legal age of marriage to people in the community. In spite of having this knowledge, adolescents still participate in early marriage due to culture, tradition, education and other behavioural factors.

“Schools can stop child marriage. When I was in Grade 5, ‘Child marriage is a serious crime’, was written on the school wall. I left school at the age of 12.”

– In-depth interview with a 21-year-old married man from the Dalit community, Tanahu, Gandaki Province

3.2 Gender norms

Education is a potent force for reshaping gender norms and influencing roles within families and communities, including on women’s employment, child marriage and violence against women. Adolescent girls, and married adolescent girls in particular, often experience discrimination as their brothers are prioritized for education. Parents, particularly those in marginalized communities, cite financial constraints and societal norms as

reasons for unequal access to education for their daughters.

Unmarried adolescents also face gender bias, with parents showing a strong preference for their sons’ education. This disparity in educational opportunities is reiterated by female community health volunteers in the selected communities, emphasizing the urgent need to challenge and change these gender-biased norms.

TABLE 12: Drivers: Gender norms in education

Individual level	Married adolescent girls reported that their parents discriminate between them and their brothers in education. Parents easily send their sons to school, but daughters do not acquire an appropriate education.
Interpersonal level	<p>Parents from these marginalized communities admit that they discriminate between their daughters and sons. They said that they cannot afford to provide education to their daughters due to gender norms prevalent in their community.</p> <p>Unmarried adolescents from marginalized communities, including the Gangai, Gharti Magar and Santhal communities, reported that their parents exhibit a clear bias in favour of their sons when it comes to education. These parents typically send their daughters to government schools, while sons are sent to boarding school, largely due to deeply ingrained traditional beliefs within the community.</p>
Community level	Female community health volunteers in selected communities, including the Badi, Gangai, Kham Magar and Santhal communities, said that the beliefs and norms surrounding the education of their children is not equal. Some parents prefer to only educate their sons.

3.3 Dropping out of school

“School dropouts” pertain to students who initially enrol at the beginning of the school year but leave before its conclusion, without transitioning to another educational institution. Dropping out is often driven by a variety of factors, with early marriage being a primary contributor. The reluctance and

youthful nature of these couples often compel them to abandon their schooling.

Parents, in many cases, confirm that these couples cease their education. The additional responsibilities that come with marriage and their engagement in income-generating activities often lead to their decision to discontinue their schooling. Unmarried

adolescents frequently note that married couples drop out of school for a multitude of reasons: some are disinterested in continuing their education, while others, due to responsibility and shyness, find it difficult to pursue their studies.

Teachers have observed that very few students continue their education after marriage. One teacher from the Badi community highlighted a concerning practice where school administration does not permit individuals who have married early to continue their education.

TABLE 13: Drivers: Dropping out of school

Individual level	Financial conditions and family income play a role in the participants from the Dalit and Rana Tharu communities leaving school. In the Raute communities, children are tasked with collecting firewood, which is needed to cook food. So they are busy collecting wood and need others to help them. They do not regard education as necessary.
Interpersonal level	<p>Most parents reported that married couples discontinue their education. Married adolescents gain additional responsibilities after they marry and are involved in income generating activities, so they drop out of school. Especially in the Muslim community, in-laws do not like to send their daughter-in-law to school after marriage. Even if they go out, girls have to wear a <i>niqab</i>.[*] Particularly in the Baram community, there is lack of education and employment and frequent elopement of girls and boys. In some cases, adolescents elope and do not come home for several months.</p> <p>According to unmarried peers, those in the Raute communities are <i>ghumante</i> (travelers/nomadic) and they are not focused on their studies. It is similar in Bote communities where adolescents regard education as unnecessary, do not participate in education and focus on the prospect of marriage starting at a young age.</p>
Organizational level	According to teachers, there are only a handful of students who manage to continue their studies after getting married. Notably, a teacher from the Badi community pointed out that the school administration does not permit individuals who have married at an early age to pursue further education.
Policy level	In the Chhetri community, children typically do not have their births registered because parents want the option of performing early marriages. Because schools require birth registration for admission to school, the youngsters do not attend school.

* A marriage between the daughter of a maternal uncle and the son of a paternal aunt

“The economic situation prevents children from pursuing education. Instead of choosing to study, they opt to look for other jobs to earn money.”

– Key informant interview with a female ward chairperson from Bote community, Chitwan, Bagmati Province

“Chepang make up almost 56 per cent of the population in this ward. They do not have consciousness that they should go to school before reaching 10 to 12 years of age. They don’t secure their children’s admission to school and instead, mothers take their children to the forest and work together. By the time they seek admission there will be a huge difference with other children in school.”

– Key informant interview with a ward chairperson from the Chepang community, Dhading, Bagmati Province

“I don’t like to study. I feel like I don’t want to study after falling in love. I dropped out of school. After being poor in my studies, why should I continue to study? My parents had no income, and they were also sad. If my studies are not good, then why should I study? I just dropped out.”

– In-depth interview with a married adolescent girl from Bote community, Chitwan, Bagmati Province

“We don’t go to school. There’s no point in going to school. We need food. We have to eat. How are we supposed to cook with only this much wood? We have to go to the next forest to collect some wood. This little wood is not enough for today. What to do for tomorrow? So we have to get married.”

– In-depth interview with a married adolescent boy from the Raute community, Dailekh, Karnali Province

4. Socio-cultural and religious drivers

Cultural and religious factors greatly influence child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. In some communities, child marriages occur because of cultural traditions and beliefs. Some participants reported being forced to get married because of cultural practices such as *rodhi ghar* – the traditional place where community people gather, relax, sing and dance. Adolescents also gather here and are often pressured by others to marry. *Mama chela, fupu cheli* is another common marriage tradition where marriages are

arranged between the daughter of a paternal aunt and the son of a maternal uncle.

4.1 Cultural practices for marriage

Some study participants claimed that early child marriages are frequently influenced by tradition. Since ancient times, child marriage has been a custom in some of the marginalized communities, including the Muslim community from Dhanusha. As such, if marriages do not take place when a person is younger than 20 years, then society has more criticism and views individuals differently.

TABLE 14: Drivers: Cultural practices

Individual level	Some of the marginalized communities prefer <i>mama chela, fupu cheli</i> rituals for marriage, and individuals insist on participating in early marriage.
Interpersonal level	In certain communities, there is a concerning practice of forced marriages. This often occurs at community fairs when a boy becomes infatuated with a girl, and, despite the girl's lack of interest, the boy forcibly takes her and imposes marriage upon her.
Community level	At the community level, people look differently at those who marry after the age of 20. The custom of marrying early has been followed since ancient times.

4.2 Astrological beliefs

Astrological beliefs are another factor that enforces child marriage. In some communities, including the Gurung community of Ilam and the Santhal community, parents insist on child

marriage because an astrologer has suggested that their children's birthdates are compatible. They believe that by marrying their children at a young age, they ensure a prosperous future for them.

TABLE 15: Drivers: Astrological beliefs

Individual level	Children and adolescents do not regard astrological beliefs, such as palm reading and reading birth charts, as drivers for child marriage. They are more focused on eloping with the person they prefer to marry.
Interpersonal level	In the Gurung community, parents tend to believe in astrology to guide early marriage. If an astrologist makes a reading that the marriage will be auspicious at 16 or 17 years of age, parents will believe in the astrological reading. If the astrologist makes an auspicious reading that marriage is best after the age of 30, then the parents will follow the reading. In the Santhal community, parents have total faith on these astrological readings.
Community level	Female community health volunteers agreed that astrological belief is a component of the marriage process. Parents match the birth charts of girls and boys during the marriage process, which may result in early marriage.

“ I have seen that one of my relatives married their daughter earlier by consultation with an astrologer because the astrologer said that her future will be better if she married before the age of 19.”

– Key informant interview with a female community health volunteer from the Santhal community, Jhapa, Koshi Province

5. Decision-making

Among the majority of participants who experienced forced marriage, girls were either persuaded by family members to get married or were coerced into marriage against their wishes. These findings underscore the significant influence of families and the interplay of family dynamics on decisions regarding child marriage, all of which have profound implications for the well-being and agency of the girls involved.

5.1 Parental pressure

In the contemporary context, parental pressure to arrange their child's marriage has become less common. Only a few

participants noted that marriages still occur due to parental influence.

In some communities, however, parents play an important role in securing marriages for their children. For example, parents initiate marriages in the Chamaar, Musahar, Muslim and Raute communities. Once parents have made a decision about their child's marriage, there is generally little resistance and the children accept their parents' choice. In the Terai, including the Chamaar, Musahar and Muslim communities, adolescents are not allowed to speak or act against the will of their parents if they wish them to marry young. Parents indicated that when they make decisions, their children also tend to agree with those choices.

TABLE 16: Drivers: Parental pressure

Individual level	In Terai communities, after the father and mother make a decision, adolescents honour their parents' wishes and accept their decision. The decision is usually made by the parents, and in many families the final decision is by the father or an elder member of the family.
Interpersonal level	Parents reported that whenever a husband and wife make any decision, the children agree. In the Raute community, for example, the decision is made by the leader of the group. According to unmarried peers, adolescents and friends are scolded when they speak up against child marriage. However, some friends get involved during the marriage of their friends.
Community level	Neighbours and community members often tell adolescents to get married, either by teasing or by pressuring them.

“The decision of marriage is taken by the guardian. Decision-making is in the hands of the parents rather than the children.”

– In-depth interview with a father from the Chamaar community, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province

“Every group has a leader whose decision holds value. One is of Kalyal (a type of Raute clan).”

– In-depth interview with a father from the Raute community, Dailekh, Karnali Province

5.2 Adolescent decision-making

Participants revealed that few adolescents are optimistic about their future. This pessimism is attributed to their parents' limited financial resources, which result in inadequate nutrition and overall instability. Although some parents also assume the role of selecting a spouse, others allow their children to independently choose their marriage partner. There are also instances where parents and adolescents jointly decide it is time to marry. Participants emphasized their involvement in the decision-making

process regarding their marriage. In some cases, however, marriages are forced upon adolescents without their input or involvement in the decision.

Occasionally, adolescents opt for marriage without seeking advice from their unmarried peers. Advising against early marriage can lead to scolding from their peers. Some unmarried participants expressed the futility of their efforts to dissuade friends from early marriage, as family pressures often outweigh the friend's advice.

TABLE 17: Drivers: Adolescent decision-making

Individual level	In communities in the Terai, such as the Chamaar, Musahar and Muslim communities, adolescents revealed that their choice was overridden by their parents. They obeyed their parents and consented to their decision. In contrast, most of the participants from the hilly region reported that they decided to marry because they fell in love.
Interpersonal level	<p>Parents reported that adolescents were involved in decisions regarding their marriage. In some cases, however, the marriage was forced and adolescents were not involved in the decision-making process.</p> <p>According to unmarried adolescents, some adolescents married on their own, without taking the advice of their unmarried peers. One adolescent friend, for example, got scolded when they suggested the friend not marry early. Some of the unmarried participants shared that no matter how much they try to convince their friends against child marriage, they end up marrying at an early age due to family pressure.</p>

“In the case of arranged marriages, the decision is usually made by the parents. However, in the case of elopement, the decision is made by boys and girls themselves.”

– *In-depth interview with an 18-year-old married female from the Chhetri community, Achham, Sudurpashchim Province*

6. Psychological drivers

As a new member of their spouses' family, some study participants who married early experienced pressure and stress. This stress was often generated as a result of the new responsibilities they were given.

6.1 Interest and curiosity

Adolescents tend to be very curious, are interested in learning about and exploring the world, and are more likely to try new things. In the Chepang and Raute communities, where there is little privacy or separate rooms for parents to engage in acts of intimacy, children often imitate their parents.

TABLE 18: Drivers: Interest and curiosity

Individual level	Adolescents develop an interest in getting married. In the Tamang community, if an adolescent sees someone get married, they feel envious or have similar desires, prompting them to marry. Curiosity and interest, along with seeing the personal achievements of friends, can lead others to marry. Adolescents in the Magar community claimed it was their choice to get married early. One participant from the Raute community said she was excited about her marriage because she had support and love from her family members.
Interpersonal level	Peers reported that in the Badi, Chaudhary, Chhetri, Gurung and Santhal communities most of the girls interviewed were very interested in getting married. Marriage at a young age occurs because of one's desire and interest.
Organizational level	Teachers from the Baram, Bote and Sarki communities observed that children were more interested in using mobile phones, which exposed them to videos and led to an interest in elopement. They also stated that when students married, their friends were excited to "tie the knot" as well, thinking they would have a new companion (spouse).

“Now, when everyone around them is getting married at a young age, they also develop an interest in getting married. If they see someone getting married and feel a desire or envy, they might start thinking about getting married themselves.”

– In-depth interview with an 18-year-old unmarried woman from the Tamang community, Bagmati Province

“I was excited about getting married – wearing a new dress, looking beautiful and getting pampered by my friends and relatives.”

– In-depth interview with a 13-year-old married girl from the Raute community, Karnali Province

6.2 Acceptance and myths

Myths and traditional beliefs hold a significant role in perpetuating child marriage in many communities. In the Baram community, if a son elopes and brings a daughter-in-law home, the parents have no choice but to accept the marriage. Elopement is accepted by society to avoid negative repercussions, including negative comments from the community, about marrying late.

If a bride does not give birth within three to four years of marriage, she is viewed negatively, with people assuming infertility or other medical issues. In these cases, husbands are advised to remarry. Moreover, if a family allows marriage at the age of 16, it is generally accepted by the community without any complaints. This reinforces and encourages child marriage and the deep-rooted myths related to child marriage and fertility.

TABLE 19: Drivers: Acceptance and myths

Interpersonal level	According to parents, if their son brings a daughter-in-law home (by elopement), the parents have no choice but to accept the marriage. Peers reported that the older people of the village say that daughters should not be kept in the house for a long time – she should be married.
Community level	If a child is not born after three to four years of marriage, people look differently at the couple. They are presumed to have medical problems. People also advise husbands to remarry, assuming and asserting that their wives cannot give birth.
Organizational level	If anyone in the family gets married at the age of 16, then the family accepts this and they do not file a complaint or case against anyone.

“ Even after three to four years, if a child is not born, it is customary to look differently at the couple.”

– Key informant interview with a female community health volunteer from the Botey community, Chitwan, Bagmati Province

“ If a woman stays longer without bearing a child after marriage, she’s called boilaa (infertile).”

– In-depth interview with a mother from the Chepang community, Dhading, Bagmati Province

7. Media and technology

Social media has changed the way we meet and interact with each other. It provides a platform to learn more about the people one associates with. However, social media usage has also contributed to and exacerbated problems in romantic relationships. Most of the participants cited that increased usage of social media has negatively affected marriages and relationships. They also observed that higher levels of social media usage have led to more child marriages.

7.1 Access to social media and mobile phones

Access to social media and mobile phones has become an emerging issue and a

contributing factor to early child marriage. According to one key community member, most of the adolescents between 14-18 years were highly dependent on phones. They were in touch with their friends through phone calls, leading to a greater likelihood of early child marriage. Facebook and TikTok were the major social media platforms used.

Social media, particularly platforms like Facebook, exerts a considerable influence on the prevalence of early marriage among adolescents. Many participants are drawn to the notion of imitating the romantic narratives they encounter on social media, motivating them to marry at a young age. These platforms often become the starting point for conversations that lead to love and, subsequently, early marriages.

TABLE 20: Drivers: Access to social media and mobile phones

Individual level	Participants used to have mobile phones at their home. When participants did not have mobile phones, they used their parent's phone. Almost every child will use mobile phones from a very young age and contact other people with it.
Interpersonal level	Parents said that adolescents exchanged their mobile numbers, had conversations and later got married. One trend in the community is the use of mobile phones being associated with making friendships with strangers. According to peers, the younger generation are addicted to social media, like Facebook and TikTok, and easily trust people. If the children are not given mobile phones, they get angry with their parents and ask for it. Children also get angry if they see other friends getting married. In cases where someone does not have a smart phone but their friends do, children tend to threaten their parents, saying they would rather die than not have a smartphone.
Community level	Some parents are very busy with their work and cannot give attention to their children, resulting in children having access to mobile phones without parental guidance.

Organizational level	Children take their mobile phones to school, despite strict rules there. Instead of focusing on education and studies, adolescents and children engage in irrelevant chatting and viewing inappropriate pictures and videos. Marriage is seen as an entertainment medium based on a limited understanding of marriage. Children and adolescents hastily get married without understanding the significance and responsibility that comes along with marriage.
Policy level	Young children talk on their mobile phones and get eloped. Mobile phones are being used incorrectly in other ways too. Social media has a lot of influence on child marriage, enabling people to connect globally, making them less likely to return home.

“Smartphones have become such a priority that parents are forced to get children and adolescents phones, even if they cannot afford education.”

– Key informant interview with a female representative from the Department of Women and Children, Achham, Sudurpashchim Province

“At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools distributed 100 SIM cards for students in coordination with the local government for their online classes. Instead of focusing on class, they were chatting with friends, which has caused a number of child marriages in the community.”

– Key informant interview with a male school teacher from the Kham Magar community, Dolpa, Karnali Province

“Nowadays, the main reason is Facebook. Social media has a lot of influence on child marriage. Child marriage in the Chepang community is also due to the fact that they do not seek awareness and education.”

– Key informant interview with a female representative from the Department of Women and Children from the Chepang community, Dhading, Bagmati Province

“These days there is a trend of Facebook, they talk on Facebook and they start talking about doing marriage from there. What else to say?” (laughs)

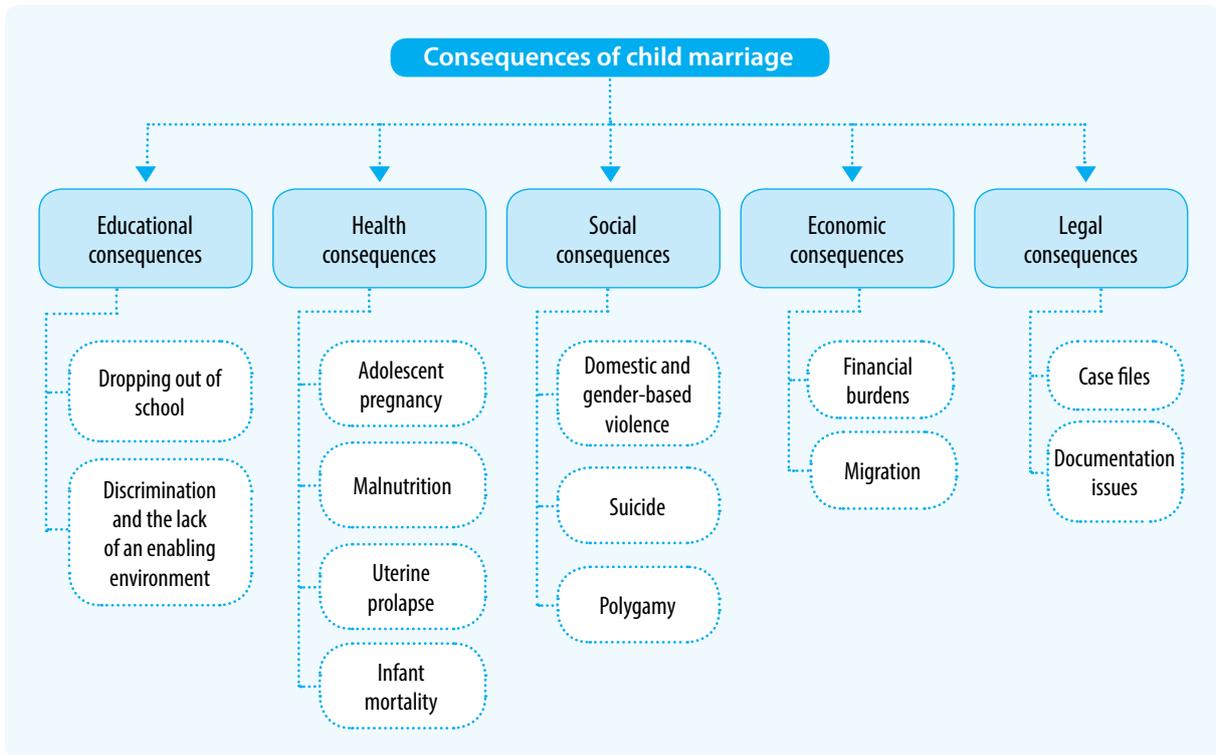
– In-depth interview with a father from the Bote community, Chitwan, Bagmati Province

► Consequences of child marriage

Child marriage directly influences adolescents, their families and communities. The majority of participants noted that child marriage has had

many negative effects on society, individuals, families and the economy, including domestic abuse, effects on mental health, adolescent pregnancy, legal repercussion and many other issues.

Figure 6 Consequences of child marriage



1. Educational consequences

1.1 Dropping out of school

Early marriage is highlighted as a contributing factor to school dropout. This aligns with a well-documented phenomenon where young girls, when married early, face societal pressure to prioritize traditional roles over education, resulting in the discontinuation of their schooling. The consequences of early marriage extend to education and career prospects, often leading to deteriorated opportunities in both areas. Girls, in particular, face challenges in returning to school after childbirth, as they feel shy or uncomfortable due to changes in their appearance and increased responsibilities.

In some communities, including the Baram, Chepang, Rana Tharu and Sarki communities, dropout rates due to child marriage are notably high. Mothers-in-law are said to force girls to have a baby as soon as they get married. Because the parents in these communities are not educated, they believe their daughter-in-law should give birth rather than pursue education after marrying. In addition, children’s enrolment into school is often delayed and they are already married by their mid-teens, reducing their opportunities to learn.

Early marriage and pregnancy not only disrupt education but also poses physical challenges, making it difficult for girls to continue their studies. One participant from the Sarki community said that almost

20 per cent of grade 9 and 10 students in Tripurasundari Municipality, Karnali Province have left school due to marriage. The burden of household chores and childcare responsibilities further hampers their educational pursuits, emphasizing the need to address the far-reaching consequences of child marriage on adolescent education.

Community-specific factors underscore the complex interplay of biological, cultural and social elements influencing educational trajectories and highlight the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges.

TABLE 21: Consequences: Dropping out of school

<p>Interpersonal level</p>	<p>In some communities, including the Chaudhary and Tamang communities, parents believe their children are at school when they are actually falling in love and running away from school. Parents want their children to study and marry later, but the children themselves seek out child marriage.</p> <p>When people get married at a young age, there are many impacts. Their education and career opportunities are affected. Unmarried adolescents from some communities, including Baram, Chepang and Sarki, said that getting married at a young age decreases the quality of life and removes children and adolescents from the education system. In the Muslim and Musahar communities, adolescent girls expressed shyness when attending school in traditional marriage attire, such as bangles and <i>kurtas</i>. This cultural consideration adds a layer of complexity to their educational experiences. It highlights the intersection of cultural norms and educational access, where traditional dress becomes a barrier for girls attending or resuming school.</p>
<p>Community level</p>	<p>After getting married it is less common for girls to attend school. Very few girls have studied and even among those who did go to school, only a few were considered educated. Female community health volunteers reported that many boys in Chamaar, Dalit, Gangai and Santhal communities work as labourers to earn money after marriage and are too tired to pay attention to studies due to their workload. In Muslim communities, the daughter-in-law does not get the opportunity to study.</p>
<p>Organizational level</p>	<p>In the Chepang community, child marriage contributes to a significant dropout rate, with individuals typically completing education only until grades 4 or 5, before marrying by the age of 15 or 16. In the Baram community, a primary reason for school dropout coincides with the onset of puberty and physical changes: girls feel uncomfortable in public, they feel discouraged about attending school and they drop out.</p>

Policy level

In most of the communities, female adolescents were involved in family responsibilities and their education was disrupted if they married at a young age. In the Dalit community, health issues – including the adverse impact girl’s physical health after pregnancy – create significant barriers, preventing many girls from continuing their education after marriage.

“Most of the girls here are not sent to school, even before marriage. Once we did prod shikchya/kishori shikchya (adult education/teenage girls education classes) where they [the girls] just did the signature just for the sake of money. Otherwise, they did not attend any classes. That’s why they don’t send them [girls] to school after marriage. Also, girls cannot leave home easily after marriage, which is the main reason why they do not continue their education.”

– In-depth interview with a 19-year-old unmarried woman from the Muslim community, Dhanusha, Madhesh Province

“If you have a child at a young age, you can face difficulties in continuing your education. Having a child at a young age can bring personal hardships as you have to take care of the child, and also continue your studies. You won’t have your own income. People say that if you don’t achieve such things at a young age, you can only attain them after having a child.”

– In-depth interview with an 18-year-old married woman from the Tamang community, Bagmati Province

1.2 Discrimination and the lack of an enabling environment

Child marriage often leads to discrimination, where young brides face unfair treatment due to their age and marital status.

This results in limited opportunities for education, economic independence and social inclusion. Stemming from a lack of enabling environments, child marriage perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender inequality. It denies young brides education and economic opportunities while exposing them to heightened health risks and social isolation.

Child marriage often results in significant consequences, one of which is the fear of facing discrimination and limited opportunities, particularly for young girls.

Gender-based bias is a central factor, with families frequently prioritizing the education of their sons while assigning less promising responsibilities, such as goat-grazing, to their daughters. Economic inequalities compound the issue, as privileged individuals find education more accessible, leaving children in poverty devoid of opportunities.

Following early marriage, a girl’s fear of being scolded by her in-laws, coupled with the absence of a supportive husband, can significantly impact her ability to continue her education. Additionally, in the absence of an enabling education environment for married adolescents, girls find it increasingly challenging to continue their education after marriage.

The fear of discrimination is not limited to families but extends to schools as well, where teachers may exhibit biases, and friends may subject girls to bullying due to their marital status. All these factors

contribute to the cycle of child marriage, reinforcing the persistence of gender-based illiteracy and underscoring the pressing need to address the discriminatory practices that perpetuate these inequalities.

TABLE 22: Consequences: Discrimination and the lack of an enabling environment

Individual level	In some Muslim communities, cultural norms restrict daughters-in-law from pursuing education outside the home due to conservative values. This limitation, often imposed by in-laws, leads girls to discontinue their studies as they are not allowed to move freely outdoors, hindering their ability to attend school. In some communities, such as the Dalit communities, in-laws want their daughter-in-law involved in household chores and force them to discontinue their education. In the Rana Tharu community, discrimination is felt when boys are sent to study and girls are sent to graze the goats.
Interpersonal level	In some communities, including the Chamaar and Musahar communities, financial constraints mean parents are unable to afford their children's education and compel their daughters to marry at an early age. Those who face poverty in the Chhetri, Dalit and Tharu communities see marriage for their daughters as a way to ensure their well-being or reduce the economic burden on the family.
Community level	According to the female community health volunteers in the Badi community, education is prioritized for sons, who are sent to better schools than daughters. In the Chaudhary community, adolescent girls were involved in household work after marriage and boys were engaged in labour and driving. Thus, they had no favourable environment to continue studying. Following child marriage, adolescent boys face added economic pressure to care for the family and their newborn, leading them to drop out of school and seek employment.
Organizational level	In the Badi community, the school administration does not allow nor provide a favourable environment to married students, preventing them from resuming their studies after marriage. In the Baram community, adolescent girls used to hide their pregnancy because they were afraid of getting bullied by friends at school, leading to the discontinuation of their education.
Policy level	According to ward chairpersons, including from the Bote, Chhetri and Muslim communities, females are often overloaded with household work and have no time for homework. In addition, married females have to pay attention to their babies, compelling them to focus on their home and family rather than school and studying.

“In my opinion, parents love daughters less and sons more, such discrimination should not be made. Some people teach their sons and send their daughters to graze goats.”

– In-depth interview with a 15-year-old married girl from the Rana Tharu community, Kailali, Sudurpashchim Province

“My in-laws insisted me not to join school. She said, ‘We earn and your husband earns. Why study? You have to study just to earn and everyone earns here. Don’t go to school, instead make the food at home and learn other kitchen activities.’”

– In-depth interview with a 19-year-old married woman from the Dalit community, Achham, Sudurpashchim Province

“There is a rule that the school administration will not allow married adolescents to study in school if they find out they are married.”

– Key informant interview with a school teacher from the Badi community, Dang, Lumbini Province

2. Health consequences

Child marriage, sexual activity and child and adolescent pregnancy result in a number of poor health outcomes. Adolescent pregnancy, malnutrition, uterine prolapse, infant and maternal mortality, and poor mental health are consequences of child marriage that participants identified. Problems related to pregnancy and childbirth are among the major causes of death for females aged 15–19 years(40).

2.1 Adolescent pregnancy

Adolescent pregnancy is a global

phenomenon with clearly known causes and serious health, social and economic consequences. According to the World Health Organization, adolescence is the period of life between the ages of 10 and 19. Child brides are more likely to have early pregnancies and have more children than girls who marry later in life. This increases their chances of pregnancy and birthingrelated problems, which can have longterm health consequences or even result in death. The younger a girl is when she becomes pregnant, the greater the risk to her health.

TABLE 23: Consequences: Adolescent pregnancy

Individual level	Participants from the Chettri and Dalit communities reported that early marriage resulted in pregnancy, owing to the pressure of their mothers-in-law. Furthermore, family members are often provoked if girls do not have a baby soon after marriage. The Sarki community* in Dolpa Municipality has an almost 100 per cent early marriage and early pregnancy rate.
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* Due to the high rate of child marriage in the Sarki community, researchers found it very difficult to make rapport and discuss the subject of child marriage with community members.

Interpersonal level	In the Santhal community, unmarried peers reported that if the daughter-in-law does not give birth early, they are regarded as infertile.
Community level	Female community health volunteers reported that adolescents in some communities, including the Baram, Dalit and Kham Magar communities and communities in the Terai, gave birth at a young age to fulfill the desires of their in-laws. For example, in the Kham Magar community, if a couple marries, they are expected to have a baby, otherwise, the daughter-in-law is considered <i>bajhi</i> (infertile) by their family members. Female community health volunteers reported that participants had no knowledge about the use of contraceptives. Early pregnancy was commonplace because they believed rumors that the use of contraception before having their first child would result in infertility.
Organizational level	Teachers from the Baram and Chepang communities reported that topics like child marriage are covered in grades 6, 7 and 8, but there is only limited information about adolescent pregnancy. For this reason, people know less about the consequences and risks of early pregnancy.
Policy level	Representatives of the Department of Women and Children from marginalized communities, including the Chaudhary and Musahar communities, mentioned that limited economic opportunities also contribute to early childbearing as young brides may see motherhood as their primary role.

“ I thought that I could never be a mother at a young age, but my mother-in-law didn’t agree. She told me, ‘I had a baby when I was 16, so what will happen to you?’ I wanted to have a child after reaching the appropriate age but she didn’t agree. The neighbours used to tell my mother-in-law, ‘She doesn’t have a baby. Why would you let her stay there? You should kick her out.’ So, in order to have prestige in the community, I had to have a baby.”

– *In-depth interview with a 16-year-old married girl from the Chhetri community, Achham, Sudurpashchim Province*

“ If a newly married couple will not have a baby soon, then the parents-in-law, who don’t understand, start to say insults like, ‘bajhi’ (infertile).”

– *Key informant interview with a female community health volunteer from Kham Magar community, Dolpa, Karnali Province*

2.2 Malnutrition

While there are close associations between a mother's age and malnutrition, other aspects of child marriage – such as health issues

faced by young mothers, short intervals between pregnancies, poverty and a lack of access to nutritional food – also contribute to malnutrition in young children.

TABLE 24: Consequences: Malnutrition

<p>Individual level</p>	<p>In the Rana Tharu and Tamang communities, participants agreed that an adolescent's uterus is not mature enough to bear children and they have a limited understanding of childcare, leading to infants and children becoming malnourished and weak. Participants from the Chettri community shared that mothers and children are not properly nourished resulting in premature birth at four to five months of pregnancy. Similarly, early pregnancy affects the physical and mental development of the child, leaving the baby's and mother's lives at risk.</p>
<p>Interpersonal level</p>	<p>In the Musahar community, parents reported that child marriage often leads to young girls having babies before their bodies are fully developed. This results in both mother and child being malnourished. The young mother's underdeveloped body cannot withstand the challenges of childbirth, and she faces a higher risk of death, especially after multiple deliveries. In the Chamaar community, child marriage is associated with a higher risk of mothers giving birth prematurely, leading to nutritional imbalances and malnourishment for both mother and child. Parents in the Rana Tharu community reported that sick and malnourished babies are often born after child marriage. In the Dalit community, unmarried peers shared that adolescent pregnancy invites complications and increases health issues. Additionally, "mistakes" by adolescents, such as using harmful substances (drug abuse), endangers the life of the child growing.</p>
<p>Community level</p>	<p>In the Rana Tharu community of Sudurpashchim Province, a female community health volunteer reported that after an adolescent pregnancy, her baby was born malnourished and the child is now shorter and more prone to disease. The effects of being malnourished impacts children's health in many ways, which can show up as the child grows. In the Chettri community, the mother and child both face health issues, in part because the mother was not well-nourished as a child.</p>

Organizational level	Teachers explained that in the Terai, the Musahar and Muslim communities tend to have short intervals between pregnancies. This increases the risk of maternal malnutrition as the mother's body does not have sufficient time to recover between childbirth and subsequent pregnancies. The role of the teacher is to provide awareness for students about the health risks due to early pregnancy.
Policy level	The ward chairpersons from the Bote, Chaudhary, Dalit and Raute communities shared that inadequate health care contributes to poor maternal nutrition and negatively impacts the nutritional status of mother and child. In the Baram and Chettri communities, early pregnancies are associated with increased health risks for both mother and the child. Maternal malnutrition during pregnancy leads to low birth weight and stunted growth in newborns. The ward chairperson from the Chepang community reported that the areas most affected and with higher malnourishment are Bungpung and Rotesh of Benighat Rural Municipality.

“The health condition of both the mother and child will not be good due to early pregnancy. There is a problem of malnutrition in children in this community. The health services are difficult due to the geographical structure as well.”

– Key informant interview with a male ward chairperson from the Chhetri community, Achham, Sudurpashchim Province

“Because of child marriage, many malnourished children have been born here. This ward is the most malnourished ward of Benighat Rural Municipality. This is our record; Rotesh and Bungpung are the most malnourished areas.”

– Key informant interview with a male ward chairperson from the Chepang community, Dhading, Bagmati Province

2.3 Uterine prolapse

Although childbirth is seen as providing families with the gift of children, changes to girls' and women's bodies can remain long after one has grown. The strain of pregnancy and labour on an underdeveloped reproductive system contributes to uterine

prolapse, a significant public health problem in Nepal. Uterine prolapse occurs when the muscles and tissue in the pelvis weaken, allowing the uterus to drop down into the vagina. Common symptoms include leakage of urine, fullness in the pelvis, bulging in the vagina, lower-back pain and constipation.

TABLE 25: Consequences: Uterine prolapse

Individual level	Married adolescents from the Dalit and Rana Tharu communities reported that young girls in child marriages often become pregnant before their bodies are fully developed, contributing to uterine prolapse.
Interpersonal level	In the Gurung, Rana Tharu and Santhal communities, parents shared that an adolescent's small uterus affects the baby's growth, resulting in the infant being born smaller and posing risks to the young mother and newborn. Likewise, unmarried adolescents from the Sarki community pinpointed that marrying and getting pregnant at a young age is problematic because the body, especially the uterus, isn't fully mature. This can lead to complications during pregnancy and childbirth.
Community level	Female community health volunteers from the Badi and Baram communities opined that pregnancy at a young age leads to heavy bleeding and health issues and increases the risk of uterine prolapse during delivery increases, making childbirth challenging. Female community health volunteers from the Gangai community mentioned that being pregnant at a young age poses significant challenges such as difficult childbirth deliveries, physical weakness, a higher risk of disease and an increased likelihood of uterine prolapse.
Organizational level	Teachers from most of the marginalized communities, including the Chamaar, Musahar and Muslim communities, mentioned that genital organs are active but not fully mature in young girls, causing pressure in the uterus. If not addressed promptly, this can lead to complications, risking the lives of the mother and child. Therefore, they identified the need for health education in the school curriculum.
Policy level	Ward chairpersons from Baram, Bote, Gurung, Raute and Santhal communities agree that child marriage involves people of a young age with no decision-making power. This combination leads them to make improper decisions regarding their body. Women's engagement in household activities and heavy work also contributes to uterine prolapse.

“Being pregnant at such a young age: there are lots of difficulties, especially for childbirth, physical weakness and risk of disease and uterine prolapse.”

– Key informant interview with a female community health volunteer from Gangai community, Jhapa, Koshi Province

2.4 Infant mortality

Early marriage can have dire consequences. One of the most tragic outcomes is the heightened risk of infant mortality. The physical and emotional unpreparedness of young brides puts the health of the mother and baby in peril. Adolescent pregnancy resulting from child marriage often leads to adverse health impacts, such as poor fetal development, preterm delivery, and a significantly increased risk of maternal mortality during childbirth. Young mothers,

married before they can fully understand life's complexities, may lack essential knowledge and support during pregnancy and childbirth, making them vulnerable to complications. In such cases, infants may be born underweight or malnourished. Maternal anaemia further compounds the risk of infant and maternal mortality. These harrowing consequences underscore the urgent need to address the impact of early marriage on the health and well-being of young mothers and their infants.

TABLE 26: Consequences: Infant mortality

<p>Individual level</p>	<p>In most of the marginalized communities, young mothers in child marriages have limited education and awareness about proper infant care and nutrition. This lack of knowledge impacts the child's well-being and increases the risk of mortality. Babies born to young mothers have low birth weight due to maternal malnutrition and other health issues, and low birth weight is associated with an increased risk of infant mortality. For example, in the Dalit community in Sudurpashchim Province, early-married adolescents lacked knowledge about breastfeeding, kept the babies in their laps and were without the help of their in-laws in the house.</p>
<p>Interpersonal level</p>	<p>In the Chamaar community, unmarried adolescents shared that giving birth at the age of 16 is more challenging, with a higher risk of maternal mortality. The young body is not fully prepared for childbirth, increasing the likelihood of complications that can lead to severe health risks and, in some cases, death during childbirth. In the Muslim community, one adolescent said that childbirth at a young age due to child marriage carries varied outcomes. Sometimes the child dies, sometimes only the child or the mother survives, and occasionally, both survive. The impact is substantial, influencing the health and well-being of both mother and child.</p> <p>In the Musahar community, unmarried peers reported that when the body is immature, problems arise during childbirth. The baby may not develop as expected, and the young mother is vulnerable to weakness, excessive bleeding and the death of their newborn. Hence, limited knowledge about pregnancy care intensifies these effects. In the same community, parents noted that child marriage often leads to adolescent pregnancy, impacting the young mother's and baby's health. The mother's underdeveloped body results in suboptimal fetal development, increasing the risk of preterm delivery.</p>

<p>Community level</p>	<p>In the Kham Magar community from Karnali Province, female community health volunteers reported that child marriage leads to serious health consequences, including reduced fertility and an increased risk of maternal mortality due to early pregnancies. In addition, the entire community was found to deliver their infants at home. Participants were quoted as saying, "God will help you, don't go to a health facility".</p> <p>In many marginalized communities, adolescents involved in eloped marriages often engage in sexual activity without proper knowledge of maternal and child health. The lack of awareness about prenatal care, safe delivery practices and newborn care can contribute to higher risks for both mother and infant. Without access to essential information and health-care services, complications during pregnancy and childbirth may arise, increasing the likelihood of infant mortality.</p>
<p>Organizational level</p>	<p>In the Raute community, teachers stated that the process of delivering a baby poses serious risks to both mother and child, particularly when anaemia is present. Anaemia, characterized by a deficiency of red blood cells, can lead to complications during childbirth, increasing the chances of maternal and infant mortality. Another concern is the possible influence of alcohol consumption. The reference to "gahat's soup" and "litchi" suggests local names for types of alcohol. The concern expressed is that excessive alcohol intake may potentially result in miscarriages or prevent some pregnancies from reaching full term.</p>
<p>Policy level</p>	<p>Representatives from the Department of Women and Children from the Bote community in Bagmati Province shared that when mothers give birth at a young age, there are significant risks, including a higher likelihood of miscarriage and the underweight newborns. The young mother's body is not fully prepared for childbirth, increasing the chances of complications that can result in a miscarriage. Additionally, the nutritional status of both mother and newborn is compromised, leading to adverse health outcomes for the child.</p>

“ Child marriage will cause teenage pregnancy due to which the mother's and baby's health will be affected. Since the body of the mother is very young, fetus development is not that good so there can be preterm delivery.”

– In-depth interview with a father from the Musahar community, Mahottari, Madhesh Province

3. Social consequences

Child marriage is often accompanied by a range of adverse social factors, including divorce, domestic violence, excessive work burdens, polygamy, suicide and various other forms of harm and distress.

consequence related to early marriage. Child marriage puts adolescents at serious risk of abuse, exploitation and violence. Girls and boys are both impacted by child marriage, but females are disproportionately affected. Participants who married as young adults were more vulnerable to assault from their spouses.

3.1 Domestic and gender-based violence

Violence between a couple is the major

TABLE 27: Consequences: Domestic and gender-based violence

Organizational level	According to this study, most of the occurrences of violence were between couples who had a love marriage. Teachers in the Chaudhary, Chhetri, Dalit, Gangai and Santhal communities said that adolescents marry at an early age, have a baby and, after a certain period of time, regret their marriage. When the adolescents got married, they weren't thinking ahead to their future. Social, economic and cultural issues were the greatest cause for disputes between family members.
Policy level	Ward chairpersons from the Chamaar and Musahar communities and representatives from the Department of Women and Children in the Baram, Chaudhary and Kham Magar communities reported that the main reason behind domestic violence was the consumption of alcohol. Couples who married earlier had limited to no job opportunities and dropped out of school. This led to alcohol consumption and violence in the family.

3.2 Suicide

The majority of mental health issues, including suicide, are believed to be impacted by early marriage. Early marriage causes a variety of family and financial issues, which in turn causes an array of mental health issues.

TABLE 28: Consequences: Suicide

Individual level	The majority of early-married couples from Gurung, Kham Magar and Muslim communities claimed to be experiencing mental health issues as a result of their varied responsibilities, including taking care of children and household chores in their husbands' homes. Situations of suicide resulted from regrets about their early marriage.
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Interpersonal level	<p>Some parents from Gangai and Kham Magar communities said that a lack of family income causes suffering and poor mental health. A few early-married couples from the Gurung and Santhal communities claimed that adolescents threatened or committed suicide due to their parents' refusal of their marriage.</p> <p>Some unmarried adolescents said that a few of their friends had experienced problems at home. For example, there was no freedom within their family and they had to make their family members happy. They didn't feel happy at their husband's home because they married early, the couple didn't understand each other, they weren't able to find happiness, and they committed suicide.</p>
Organizational level	<p>School teachers also believe that early marriage can lead to poor mental health and suicide. One teacher from the Santhal community in Jhapa shared that, following their early marriage, a young couple committed suicide at a tea garden because their families were pressuring them to separate to maintain family prestige.</p>
Policy level	<p>Participants from the Gurung and Kham Magar communities reported that, in the majority of cases, there miscommunication between partners when a husband or wife works abroad. When a husband relocates for work, the wife may have an affair with another man at home, or the husband marries while away from home, causing conflict in the family and at times resulting in suicide.</p>

“A marriage was arranged when the adolescents were 16. After that, the boy went to India and the girl was left at home alone. She got pregnant, and the child was born. Then, when the boy returned, he fell in love with another girl, leaving [the first wife] behind. She even attempted suicide.”

– Key informant interview with a female representative from the Department of Women and Children from the Magar community, Tahahu, Gandaki Province

3.3 Polygamy

For certain communities in Nepal, infertility is a key factor in permitting and accepting co-wives. Other contributing factors for allowing co-wives include a lack of financial and social support; internal conflict between a husband and wife; the wife moving back to her *maiti* (maternal home) and the husband remarrying; and the husband working abroad and taking a second wife.

Polygamy has also been on the rise due to dissatisfaction with first marriages, particularly when these marriages occur at a young age. This dissatisfaction, coupled with various societal pressures and expectations, has led some individuals to consider polygamy as an option.

TABLE 29: Consequences: Polygamy

Individual level	Married individuals from the Bote, Kham Magar and Sarki communities said that polygamy occurs as a result of child marriage. When adolescents are young, they marry for attraction; after a period of time, for example, the husband realizes this and marries another partner.
Interpersonal level	Some parents from the Bote, Gangai, Gharti Magar and Santhal communities admitted that their sons married two wives as a result of child marriage. Due to a lack of understanding, they married at a young age, realized they were immature at the time and decided to marry someone else. Parents also play a role in polygamy when they find a second wife for their son if their daughter-in-law cannot have a baby within two to three years of marriage.
Community level	Some of the female community health volunteers from the Musahar, Santhal and Sarki communities shared that a few adolescent boys engaged in polygamy due to fertility issues. Adolescent boys and their families fault the adolescent girls if they don't have children within two to three years after marriage.
Policy level	Some ward chairpersons and representatives from the Department of Women and Children said polygamy by adolescent boys is often due to foreign employment. After an early marriage, a husband may travel abroad to find work, due to financial problems at home. Long-distance relationships have been known to create conflicts between husbands and wives, especially when there are affairs and second marriages.

“Domestic violence has led to polygamy in many houses. There is also the registration of domestic violence and polygamy in the ward. Our mayor has a responsibility to tackle the cases and he has done this too.”

– Key informant interview with a female representative from the Department of Women and Children from the Sarki community, Dolpa, Karnali Province

4. Economic consequences

Child marriage and adolescent pregnancy creates a burden on the family and results in economic consequences.

4.1 Financial burdens

Child marriage contributes to losses in earning for women which creates a

financial burden for the family. Married girls frequently drop out of school and give birth to their children at an early age, endangering their health and that of their offspring. Similarly, the addition of new family members can result in increased medical costs. Child marriage, which has its roots in poverty, often perpetuates financial constraints for girls and their families.

TABLE 30: Consequences: Financial burdens

Individual level	<p>Within the Muslim community, there are situations where the daughter-in-law holds a position of employment, such as a staff nurse, and is capable of earning. Yet cultural norms restrict her from pursuing work outside the home. Consequently, her education is essentially unused, placing added pressure on her sons to be primary earners for the family. Should the sons be unable to fulfill this role, the family finds itself compelled to navigate financial constraints. A married adolescent boy from the Badi community expressed that in the past, his earnings were solely for his personal needs, which proved to be sufficient. However, with the responsibilities of marriage, he now finds himself in a situation where his income has to cover the expenses of the entire family. This shift in financial obligations has created an economic burden for the family.</p>
Interpersonal level	<p>Most of the parents in the community believed that families in poverty resorted to child marriage as a coping mechanism. They have come to realize that child marriage further exacerbates economic challenges. In the Musahar community, early pregnancies and childbirth lead to increased maternal and child health-care costs. Limited access to health-care services also results in higher medical expenses.</p> <p>Some parents from the Dalit and Tharu communities said that they feel more of a financial burden when their sons marry at an early age. It can result in early pregnancy and further increase the family size and the economic requirements.</p> <p>Observing the current circumstances of their friends, unmarried adolescents perceive child marriage as a challenging prospect. They expressed reservations, noting that as marriage unfolds, families expand and job opportunities become more limited. Consequently, unmarried individuals are unenthusiastic about getting married, recognizing the potential difficulties associated with increased family responsibilities and restricted employment options.</p>
Community level	<p>A female community health volunteer in the Gharti Magar community reported that child marriage ushers the addition of a new family member. This makes it difficult to fulfill the basic needs and daily requirements of family members at home.</p>
Organizational level	<p>A teacher in the Badi community asserted that early marriage only leads to poverty: young adolescents who marry early lack the skills, knowledge and education needed to generate income. Consequently, this makes it challenging for communities to earn a living and thrive, emphasizing the economic hardships brought about by premature marriages.</p>

Policy level	One notable consequence of child marriage, according to ward chairpersons in the Dalit communities, is a significant number of individuals dropping out of school. Childbirth tends to occur immediately after marriage, impacting girls and contributing to weakened physical conditions. In the Dalit communities, many adolescents face challenges accessing adequate services and facilities after giving birth, amplifying the health risks associated with early motherhood. In most Dalit families, economic conditions are precarious, and the husbands are frequently forced to seek employment elsewhere after marriage, leaving the families financially strained.
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“Previously, when I was alone, I used to earn and it was really enough. But now I have to look after my family after marriage and it is a burden. Even my father and mother have not provided me with money after marriage. They say, ‘It’s your responsibility to look after your family now’.”

– *In-depth interview with a married, male adolescent from the Badi community, Dang, Lumbini Province*

4.2 Migration

Migration is another crucial consequence of child marriage. After marriage, an adolescent may drop out of school and, if finances become an issue, seek foreign employment.

TABLE 31: Consequences: Migration

Individual level	Communities along the Indian border, such as the Gangai, Rana Tharu, Santhal and Tharu communities, prefer going to India for employment. Adolescent boys seek foreign employment, and often feel it is their only option, because they married early, lack employment opportunities, dropped out of school or have an increased number of family members.
Interpersonal level	Going abroad for employment is common in most of the communities that border India. Some parents from the Baram, Chhetri and Dalit communities reported that they send their sons abroad to improve the economic condition of their family.

“The main reason behind migration here is the lack of proper job opportunities, and everyone goes to India for job purposes. Here, the trend is to marry earlier and go to India for job opportunities to fulfil the needs of all the family members.”

– *Key informant interview with a male ward chairperson from the Chhetri community, Achham, Sudurpashchim Province*

5. Legal consequences

Child marriage gives rise to a myriad of legal issues. Legal repercussions are a primary consequence of early marriage, leading to complications related to case files and various forms of documentation.

5.1 Legal cases

The Nepali Constitution forbids child

marriage, as do the laws: the Government of Nepal has banned child marriage, set the marriage age at 20, and is actively working to outlaw all types of sexual abuse. Those who marry at an early age are punished by the law. The essential rights of children in Nepal – to be shielded from abuse, violence, trafficking, and early and forced marriages – is guaranteed by the constitution.

TABLE 32: Consequences: Legal cases

Individual level	The majority of people from almost all communities interviewed were aware of the legal consequences of getting married too young, including lawsuits and being punishable by law.
Community level	One female community health volunteer from the Gharti Magar community claimed that she had to endure beatings from the locals after filing a case for early marriage arranged by the parents. Many relatives of that girl gave warnings to the female community health volunteer and, as a result, she chose not to file the complaint.
Organizational level	Some teachers from the Badi, Baram, Bote and Chaudhary communities reported that when students elope at an early age, parents accept the marriage and chose not to file a case. Further, the two families will settle the case between them without the involvement of the police or other ward persons.
Policy level	According to several ward chairpersons and representatives from the Department of Women and Children, only a few child marriage cases were filed. Both parties/families manage the cases between themselves and choose not to file a case.

“There is awareness, sir. They have realized it to some extent. They have hidden behind their culture. It's like they are hiding behind their cultural practices.”

– Key informant interview with a female representative from the Department of Women and Children from Kham Magar community, Tanahu, Gandaki Province

“If they file a complaint, we are going to look very closely. But the problem is that they don't want to complain because they will fall into the trap of the law. This happens from both sides. Both parties think that if they stay away from the community for a while the case will be settled.”

– Key informant interview with a female ward chairperson, Tamang Community, Dhadi, Bagmati Province

5.2 Documentation issues

Policies related to child marriage, birth registration and documentation have created multiple challenges for those who marry early and for their children.

TABLE 33: Consequences: Documentation issues

Individual level	Most of the early-married couples from the Badi, Chaudhary, Gangai, Gurung and Santhal communities said they wanted to obtain birth registrations for their children, but insufficient documentation of their marriage makes it challenging. This is especially true when a couple has a child at the age of 16-17: they cannot register their child's birth because the couple does not have a marriage registration.
Policy level	According to ward chairpersons from almost all communities, children whose parents married early face the greatest challenge in securing birth registrations. Before the age of 20, the law doesn't allow marriage registrations. Without a marriage registration, it is challenging to obtain a child's birth registration

II. FINDINGS FROM THE *KURAGRAPHY*

Kuragraphy – derived from the Nepali word, *kurā*, which means casual/informal talk – is a term used by the British anthropologist Robert R. Desjarlais in 2003 to describe an ethnographic method for data generation. With *kuragraphy*, researchers collect information through unstructured, unscheduled conversations with people in their natural settings. Conversations are based on a theme and researchers utilize headnotes and field diaries, though mobile recorders and cameras can also be used as the situation permits.

During this study, researchers discovered the bitter reality of communities through the *kuragraphic* method. *Kuragraphy* was conducted in automobiles, tea stalls, *chautari* (a rest stop/gathering place around big trees), temples, police stations and more. Community influencers were the main target of this *kuragraphy* and included astrologers, faith leaders, police, senior citizens (i.e., grandmothers and grandfathers), traditional healers and village chiefs. *Kuragraphy* was

used to gain insight from these groups of people among the different provinces.

► Bagmati Province

Police: Chepang community

The Rorang police report that there is no case registry regarding child marriage. The police inspect these complaints thoroughly; however, child marriage cases are not filed or they “do not reach the ears of the police”. The public should be concerned. The police cannot intervene unless the cases are reported. Cases of child marriage will not come forward if the police go looking. The police need to understand the consequences and need to want to stop child marriage.

Senior citizen: Chepang community

One important ritual is called *khoji khana*: how and where my daughter reached the Chepang community. The parents come to *khoji khana*, bringing a goat, and the community calls the girl's parents forward.

The parents ask whether the girl has come in happiness or unhappiness, to which the girl generally replies, “I have come in happiness”. If she says, “I am not happy and I am brought forcefully”, then the girl will be taken back to her parents.

Traditional healers: Bote community

A female traditional healer or *jhakri* (shaman) said, “I had eliminated the *laagu bhaagu* (*bad evil*) by offering grains of rice and *diyos* (lit oil lamps) during the delivery. My hands were reaching inside her vagina, touching the placenta and navel inside. I took it out (shows her hands and bends in a symbolic way on how she inserts). The intestine with the navel itself came out, getting watery from inside. Otherwise, I would have taken it out by doing this (shows her hand up to wrist and reaches towards pelvis). If you don’t trust me, you can ask the driver’s wife. It was her fate, what could we do? We aren’t gods. I had taken it out by inserting my hands and pulled forcefully but couldn’t pull. Water had gone inside, though the placenta was there. The mother died.”

The traditional healer shared another story, “The mother’s placenta had reached up to here (shows at the side of right pelvis), and I took my hand and put it inside. She screamed, saying, “Ouch...!” I took it out suddenly. The baby was staying like this; the child was dead.”

► Gandaki Province

Police: Baram community

One police officer said, “Child marriages are not registered, which is compatible with the community. Only cases of quarrels, theft and missing people are reported. Some cases go to the judicial unit of the municipality. The people of the society will arrange that they will be jailed for child marriage. If someone reports child marriage, the police inform the

district and take action. Child marriages are not registered in the hills like they are in the Terai.”

Senior citizens: Dalit (Bishwokarma) community

A grandfather talked about child marriage in Gandaki Province, “Child marriage is less common than it was before. Child marriage is not good but their desire is to get married early. There is education, health care, but still some couples seem to be doing child marriage. Earlier, older people used to marry younger girls, but now it is customary to marry people of the same age. Legal action should be taken against them.”

Village chief: Baram community

A village chief shared, “Here, child marriage is done by the boys and girls of their own accord. There is no custom of ‘showing the hand’ before marriage and running away after it. They meet on mobile phones, at festivals and fairs, and fall in love, run away and get married. To prevent such a thing, the law should be made stronger.”

► Karnali Province

Police: Sarki community

According to the police, child marriage cases are not registered in Karnali Province, though there are many registered cases of suicide, theft and fighting. The police are not tracking how many child marriages have taken place in each community, however, there is a system to advance the process only if cases come forward to be registered.

Senior citizens: Sarki community

According to senior citizens, the incidence of child marriage has decreased but it has not been eradicated. In earlier times, there were no health facilities and people were uneducated. Now there are schools, health

facilities and fewer deaths. Child marriage could be stopped if the *dhami* (traditional healers), parents and adolescents were educated and the laws were tightened. Marrying at a young age can cause lawsuits, but it also impacts the mother and child, so early marriages should be stopped. Due to the increase of mobile phones and internet use, child marriage and elopement have increased. For this reason, phones should not be given to children and adolescents at a young age.

Traditional healers: Kham Magar community

Traditional healers (*dhami*) of Karnali talked about the tradition of “showing hands” (palm reading) and predicting the future from rice grains. Everyone has seen the present, so they show their hands to see the past and future. During this process, some children come to know whether or not they can get married. If their hearts are matched but the marriage date is not complementary, it is customary that the traditional healer cannot stop the marriage. They understand that the law of the people and the law of *dhami* are different. Child marriage is less common than before. It is not good for a child to marry or an adolescent to get pregnant, but there is a notion that *dhami* should not stop such marriages. If the *dhami* does not allow a marriage to take place according to their wishes, they believe they have committed a sin, so it is customary for them not to stop those marriages.

► Koshi Province

Religious leaders

Christian leaders: Santhal community

In the Santhal Christian community, church fathers and sisters try to minimize child marriage and influence adolescents by requesting they stay in school and delay

marriage. Some adolescents have dropped out of school because they come from poor families and are unable to pursue higher studies. Others continue studying and are determined not to marry before 20 years of age, as they are not allowed by the father and the church. For those who eloped and married before the age of 20, the father did not allow them to marry inside the church. To avoid sinful behaviour, couples must obey the church rules and adhere to necessary discipline. One father emphasized the word *anushashan*: salvation from the sin they have committed. As a punitive approach to child marriage, adolescents are not allowed to meet their relatives or friends for a long period, and must also visit the church alone and ask for forgiveness for six months. These approaches have been influential in adolescents delaying marriage until after 20 years of age.

Priest: Santhal community

Among a group of community influencers was a priest from the Santhal community, whom most of the community members listen to. He noted that child marriage still prevails but is occurring less than in the previous decade. He has faced many criticisms when he tries to stop child marriage. People fear that when their daughters grow up, they will elope. They don't think the daughter should be educated for higher studies. That is why parents marry their children before the legal age. Most of the marriages are love marriages or elopements; eventually, parents accept their child's marriage once the bride comes to the house. The earliest age of marriage in this community is 15 years old. Domestic violence occurs when the girl is too young, is pregnant and cannot properly perform the household chores. Very few domestic cases have occurred in the community, though a rape case has recently been filed by the victim and the perpetrator is in custody. This

community influencer helped the victim file the case, in coordination with other local leaders.

Community influencers, like priests, report having handled and minimized cases of early marriage. For example, community influencers reportedly ask parents of adolescents not to allow marriage when the child is young. If a child marries, they ask if the parent would like to file a case, but the parents would rather accept their child's elopement than file a lawsuit.

The community influencer has also seen many young mothers experience health complications during pregnancy and delivery. Adolescent pregnancy is prevalent among people in the community because they pressure the new bride to get pregnant. Couples who marry early have not registered their marriages nor have they registered their child's birth. When community members ask the community influencers why registration is not occurring, they have to inform people that child marriage is against the law.

Community members involve the priest in arranging marriages, as he acts as a *manjaram* (a leader of the community). Previous traditions included the practice of *tanera garne bibaha* and forcefully marrying. But those practices are completely eradicated due to the strict legal rules.

Traditional healers: Santhal community

One belief is that certain people have supernatural powers to attract two people or can use mantras to separate people. When adolescent girls and boys are attracted to each other, some will go to a traditional healer for *mohani* (attraction through mantras). Parents who do not want to accept their children's love marriage, or when a dowry is insufficient, will go to a traditional healer to use a mantra to

separate their children. One faith healer shared that he has attracted and separated couples after being requested to do so. Adolescents also visit traditional healers when they have been unable to conceive. The traditional healers provide herbs and medicines, and couples believe that this helps them conceive. One traditional healer shared that this happened to his daughter.

► Lumbini Province

Police: Chaudhary community

At the time of the *kuragraphy* there were no child marriage cases registered at the local police stations. If child marriage happens in the community, parties from the boy's and girl's side settle the case between them. When there is a dispute between the families or if there is a suicide or domestic violence, then the family registers the case. Awareness programmes for school children have been organized by police personnel to address domestic violence and traffic rules. But police personnel have not conducted awareness programmes related to child marriage.

Senior citizens: Gharti Magar community

According to a grandmother, child marriage is a trend driven by the adolescents. Most child marriage cases happen through elopement and parents and grandparents are not involved. In some cases, parents and grandparents encourage child marriage: some grandmothers convince their grandchildren to marry early because they wish to see their great-grandchildren before they die.

Traditional healers: Chaudhary community

Traditional healers are influential in the community but they are not involved in arranging child marriages. Now people don't believe in using traditional healers for child marriage.

► Madesh Province

Police: Musahar community

Police personnel explained that there is negligence and carelessness on the part of parents when it comes to child marriage. Parents have no time to take care of their children. Even if child marriage occurs, the police are not aware and come to know about it only when vital cases, such as polygamy or suicide, take place. Otherwise, parents are also indirectly involved in marriage and do not file child marriage cases or complaints.

Senior citizens: Musahar community

One grandmother shared that, in the past, women were not allowed to see their husbands' face when they got married, but now everyone can see their husbands before they marry. Grandmothers also tend to like child marriage in part because the matter can be taken care of quickly and efficiently. They also have the opportunity to "see their grandchild" if their children marry and have children. They are in favour of child marriage.

Traditional healers: Chamaar community

Tradition healers do not have any involvement in child marriage cases. Individuals tend not to have blind faith or belief in the traditional healers, so marriage is not forced.

Village chief: Chamaar community

One village chief reported that he was against child marriage but the community was in agreement and did not adhere to his wishes. People still perceive child marriage positively and are not aware of its negative impacts. He said child marriage is due in large part to parents who force the issue. Children cannot deny their parents' wishes and end up getting married. Though the

village chief is in a position of power, even they cannot change the community's opinions.

► Sudurpashchim Province

Police: Chettri community

In Achham, one police personnel said he was not aware of cases of child marriage because no reports had come to him. He also did not seek out cases of child marriage in the Chhetri community. In Kailali, however, the police said many child marriage cases were being filed. Parents only tend to come, though, when their children are lost and they finally realize the reason is child marriage.

They also said that even when cases related to violence are registered, the culprit is always the boy. Laws regarding child marriage aim to protect children, especially girls, due to the historical prevalence of gender inequality and the disproportionate impact on girls' education, health and development. However, it is essential to acknowledge that boys can also be victims of child marriage and suffer negative consequences.

Senior citizens: Chettri community

Some grandfathers reported that sons still receive preferential treatment in society. Adolescents have no interest in their studies and are busy on their mobile phones all the time. Grandparents want to see their grandchildren get married, so marriage at a young age is best. Also, there will be a helper in the house when the grandsons get married.

Learnings from the kuragraphy

Using *kuragraphy* to conduct informal conversations with community influencers – including astrologers, faith leaders, police, senior citizens, traditional healers and village chiefs – provided deeper insight into the practice, drivers and consequences of child marriage within each community.

Christian religious leaders from the Santhal community seem to be playing a role in minimizing child marriage. Adolescents who marry before the age of 20 are disciplined by the church are not allowed to meet their relatives or friends for six months. They also have to regularly visit the church and seek forgiveness. This seems to be a factor for some adolescents waiting until age 20 to marry.

Police personnel said that child marriage occurs, but cases are generally not registered at the police station and issues are settled between the families. One exception was in Karnali Province, where child marriage cases are filed after parents come to report that their children are missing because they eloped.

Most of the **senior citizens** who participated in the *kuragraphy* did not object to child marriage, elopement or arranged marriages. A key motivator to supporting child marriage was their desire to have (i.e., “see”) grandchildren before they got older and passed away.

Traditional healers (i.e., *dhami* and *jhakri*) are key influencers and, in most communities, do not have an official role in arranging child marriages though they are asked to bless or prevent them. One exception was in the Santhal community in Jhapa (Karnali Province) where the traditional healers arrange and prevent child marriages from happening. Typically, traditional healers are approached by parents when they are disappointed with the dowry and/or do not support their child’s choice for a love marriage. In this case, the traditional healer will perform a mantra to separate the child from their romantic interest. Traditional healers have also felt pressured not to stop child marriages, for example when a *dhami* objects to a marriage, they believe they have sinned, so it is customary not to stop those unions.







Part

5



CONCLUSIONS

The behavioural drivers of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Nepal are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with societal norms, economic conditions and cultural expectations. Poverty, discriminatory practices and limited agency of adolescents, especially girls and in certain communities, contribute to early marriages. The influence of family decisions, perceptions of physical attractiveness and the desire for independence also play a pivotal role. Additionally, the lack of comprehensive education and awareness, coupled with societal pressures and traditional beliefs, contribute to the perpetuation of these practices.

Child marriage and adolescent pregnancy have far-reaching and detrimental consequences for individuals, families and communities. These practices perpetuate cycles of poverty and underdevelopment, limiting the potential of young girls and hindering societal progress.

The impact on the health of young brides and their children is severe, with increased risks of pregnancy-related complications, malnutrition, infant mortality rates, uterine prolapse and long-term health consequences. Child marriage diminishes educational opportunities, leading to school dropout and restricting the empowerment of young girls. Furthermore, the financial implications extend to the families involved, exacerbating economic challenges.

► Drivers of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy

Community, parental and modern cultural influence: Most child marriages in the focus communities seemed to be a result of elopement or love marriage due to a variety of driving forces. Cultural traditions are still strong in many communities and play a key role in the persistence of early and arranged marriages where the father's authority plays a pivotal role. In Muslim communities, participants often have limited agency in opposing their parents' decisions, compelling them to marry at a young age. While the older generation advocates that girls not be confined at home for extended periods of time and encourages marriage once they reach a certain age, their desire to have grandchildren is also a motivating factor to support child marriage. Notably, the perception of physical attractiveness, including body size and height, also influences these decisions.

Low value placed on education: Education is another compelling factors for early marriage. When families do not place high value on education, cannot afford education

or have not put their children in school until they are older, the short-term benefits of early marriage outweigh the long-term benefits of education.

Poverty and discrimination: Poverty, discrimination and economic circumstances such as livelihood challenges, economic insecurity, low socio-economic status and limited job opportunities are pressure points that impel families or adolescents to marry early. In the Kham Magar community in Dolpa, Karnali Province, for example, parents marry their sons at a young age so their child brides, who are supposedly adept at collecting Yarshagumba, can contribute to the family income. Without adequate income, families that struggle to feed and provide for their daughters see child marriage as one solution to alleviate these burdens and provide for their children.

Social media and limited understanding about the reality of marriage: Elopements tend to be driven by adolescents and are frequently motivated by family conflicts, broken households and the fear of rejection by romantic partners. Many early-married couples who had a love marriage did so without the consent of their parents. Parents' preoccupation with work often provides children with access to mobile phones. Social media and mobile phones have had a significant impact in adolescent's choosing elopement, and *kuragraphy* with senior citizens confirmed this finding. Mobile phones, Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp and other social media and messaging platforms facilitate connections with strangers, which frequently result in love marriages and elopements. Many participants perceive marriage as a form of entertainment, failing to fully grasp its significance and responsibilities, which results in a rushed marriage. Personal desires, curiosity and bearing witness to other marriages contribute to the drive for early marriage.

► Consequences of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy

Child marriage is undeniably detrimental to the lives of those involved. The absence of freedom within the family, along with the pressure to satisfy family members, is a prevalent theme among child brides. Observed cases of early marriage are typically associated with increased domestic responsibilities for girls, dropping out of school, early pregnancy and financial hardship.

Community and family disruptions: Alcohol consumption and family disputes play a part in the breakdown of marriages, with some couples regretting their decisions. Meanwhile, adolescents from the Santhal Christian community who marry early are disciplined by the church and are not allowed to visit family members for six months.

Early pregnancy and health risks: Child brides are disproportionately burdened with early pregnancies, leading to a higher likelihood of pregnancy-related complications and severe, long-term health consequences. The risk to maternal and child health is particularly pronounced among those who become pregnant at a younger age. Malnutrition compounds these challenges, contributing to weakened health and even premature mortality for young brides. Child marriage perpetuates a cycle of underdevelopment, as adolescents, lacking the maturity and life skills necessary to earn income, face severe mental health challenges. The physical and emotional toll of marriage at a young age are compounded by the difficulty of childbirth, including inadequate breastfeeding and stunted child development.

Economic hardship: Early marriages often lead to economic struggles and exert a profound and enduring effect on the lives of women. Rooted in poverty, child marriage creates a detrimental cycle for adolescents, as their growing families require additional financial resources. It also significantly

diminishes women's earning potential and further entrenches them into financial hardship.

Education: School abandonment is a common consequence of early marriage, threatening the prospects of adolescent boys, girls and their children. Many young married couples face discrimination at school, or are not allowed to pursue their education, further exacerbating the situation. While some husbands may be supportive of their wives' educational aspirations, the enabling environment for post-marriage education remains limited and is exacerbated by the fear of reprimands from in-laws for pursuing education.

Infertility and dissatisfaction in current marriages: Polygamy is also on the rise, particularly when first marriages occur at a young age. Infertility, or the fear of infertility, is a major reason that parents and community members push for sons to take additional wives. Any women cite loveless marriages, a lack of financial and social support, and the fear of divorce as motivation for accepting co-wives in their marriages.

Suicide: Instances of suicide among early-married couples, especially in the Santhal and Gurung communities, highlight the severe consequences of societal pressures and family conflicts.

Undocumented marriages and births: The negative repercussions of child marriage extend to documentation, complicating the marriage and birth registration process and impeding the lives of couples and their children.

Triangulation of the literature review, the qualitative findings of behavioural determinants of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, and *kuragraphy* led to key findings about the drivers, consequences and opportunities to prevent child marriage. Meanwhile, adolescent pregnancy and divorce have led people to become acutely aware of the negative repercussions and the need to prevent child marriage.



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Part 6



RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts to address child marriage and early pregnancy must encompass comprehensive strategies, including education, awareness and legal reforms, to break the cycle of child marriage and promote the well-being of adolescents. It is also crucial to foster an environment that supports the education and empowerment of young girls and boys, ensuring their rights, health and opportunities for a better future. Here are five recommendations to work towards ensuring a brighter and more secure future for the children and adolescents of Nepal:

1. Educational campaign on the consequences of social media

An educational campaign focusing on digital literacy, critical thinking skills and safe online behaviours can empower young individuals to navigate social media responsibly and avoid situations that may lead to early marriage or other harmful outcomes. The campaign should highlight the dangers of online relationships, emphasizing the importance of exercising caution and discernment when interacting with strangers on social media platforms. Additionally, it should address the emotional, social and legal ramifications of eloping and marrying at a young age, underscoring the significance of informed decision-making, and seeking guidance from trusted adults. Collaborating with parents, educators, community leaders and online safety experts, the campaign can deliver tailored messages across various mediums to effectively reach children and adolescents.

2. Engagement with family members

To effectively engage family members in combatting child marriage, deploy educational campaigns and social mobilizers for family counselling sessions, targeting all members including children, adolescents, grandparents and decision-makers. These sessions should focus on challenging harmful gender norms, emphasizing the negative consequences of early marriage and promoting the value of delaying marriage. The campaign should underscore the long-term implications on education, health and overall well-being, aiming to foster self-awareness among families. By involving all members

and encouraging open dialogue, communities can empower individuals to make informed decisions and create a supportive environment conducive to preventing child marriage and promoting healthier relationships.

3. Safeguarding child rights

Develop and promote awareness campaigns to address the hesitations and fears associated with reporting child marriage cases. Provide clarity on reporting procedures and highlight the significance of safeguarding children's rights. Additionally, broader policy formation can facilitate the implementation of existing laws, providing frameworks and resources to support reporting mechanisms effectively. By combining awareness efforts with policy support, communities can be empowered to take proactive steps in reporting child marriage cases and protecting vulnerable children from harm.

4. School health programmes

To enhance awareness and prevention efforts regarding early marriage, early pregnancy and reproductive health, it is crucial to integrate comprehensive training into school health programmes, specifically targeting teachers. Teachers serve as primary sources of information reaching children and their families. Empowering them with accurate knowledge and resources is pivotal. Training should encompass essential aspects of reproductive health education, including the risks and consequences associated with early marriage and pregnancy. Furthermore, it is imperative to identify additional influencers within communities who can reach children for positive change. This may include community leaders, peer educators,

local health workers, school nurses and religious leaders. In addition, require child marriage, reproductive health and adolescent pregnancy to be part of the education curriculum starting in Grade 6.

5. Vocational training

To address a set of root causes of child marriage – economic factors and poverty-driven aspirations – it is imperative to incorporate vocational training initiatives into intervention programmes. We can challenge misconceptions and promote alternative pathways to sustainable livelihoods by integrating key messages emphasizing that child marriage is not a solution to poverty. We can also highlight the associated negative consequences such as limiting educational and economic

opportunities. Providing adolescents and their families with access to appropriate money-generating skills and vocational training equips them with the tools necessary to secure stable incomes and support their families economically. This proactive approach not only addresses immediate financial needs but also empowers individuals to make informed choices about their futures, ultimately reducing the prevalence of child marriage and fostering economic resilience within communities. Finally, including adolescents in decision-making processes and programme development will ensure that their needs and concerns are better understood. Their perspectives can aid in the development of effective interventions and policies aimed at preventing child marriage and promoting children's overall well-being.





ANNEXES

Annex I CASE STUDIES

Muna: Bagmati Province

Muna lives in a Tamang village in Dhading District with eight family members at her husband's house. She was married at the age of 15 through elopement, after falling in love through phone calls, and is now the mother of two children.

Muna used to meet her soon-to-be husband frequently before marriage because they were close relatives. Her parents loved her and advised her to make him wait for six to seven years before marrying. They admitted, though, that they could not say anything if a boy and girl love each other. Her husband said that he would love her and wouldn't beat her but he threatened to commit suicide if he couldn't marry her. Muna wanted to continue her studies and asked him to wait for five to six years for her. She also committed to only be with him, but he didn't agree.

After she arrived at her husband's house, she couldn't study because she had to cut grass. Her husband forced her to have a child right after marriage, so she gave birth to two children. Even though Muna asked to be taken to the hospital to deliver her children, her mother-in-law insisted that she have home deliveries. She told Muna that hospital would operate on her (i.e., cesarean section) if she went to hospital. Following the birth of her children, Muna also had to undergo a breast operation due to an infection.

One day, Muna's father-in-law was drinking alcohol and cursed Muna saying, "I don't love my daughter-in-law, may she die. Don't stay with my son, go and elope with another man." Muna cried and went to her parents' home. She says, "I got in trouble by marrying early. I cry because people humiliate me. After marriage, my babies were born and I need to look after them. It is difficult to work with babies."

She says now, "I have two very young children, what to do?"

Muna's husband gives her all his earnings and keeps pocket money for his cigarettes. After her children get bigger, Muna would like to learn to tailor or work in a beauty parlor.

Asha: Karnali Province

This Raute community is situated around Dailekh District in Karnali Province and is a nomadic migratory ethnic group with a population of 141. They reside in small temporary huts in the middle of the forest and when someone from their community passes away, they often leave and relocate elsewhere. One pair of teachers and one health worker are assigned to work with the community, though the Raute community has no interest in studying or accessing health care.

The Raute community has three main beliefs: non-farming, non-settlement and non-literacy. They also have three *gotras* (lineage or clan) – the Kalyal, Raskoti and Swavanshi – which are allowed to intermarry. Intermarriage with other communities, however, is not allowed. Widows live separately in a house near the settlement (with their door opposite the others). Raute are not supposed to go for formal education because they are a mobile population. Pregnancy is common, though they have a very high neonatal mortality rate. Open sexual relationships are socially acceptable and marriages are typically as much about the ritual as they are the sexual relationship. Girls and women are eligible to get married after the age of 12, though they should not marry younger boys. Boys must marry after *Bratabandha*. Considered the beginning of manhood, *Bratabandha* is a complex Hindu ceremony where boys, aged between 8 and 12, take the first steps in learning the traditional laws, ceremonial roles and rituals of their caste.

While girls in the Raute community generally get married when they reach around 12 years of age, Asha got married to a 26-year-old man from the Raute community. Though she did not want to get married, her parents arranged her marriage. Now, Asha has to carry water, cook food, fetch firewood and perform other household chores every day.

Asha's husband married her because he could not find a suitable (i.e., older) girl. Asha is scared that she might not be able to conceive a child at such a young age. She does not like her husband's habit of excessive drinking and smoking and their age difference frightens her. Watching her sisters-in-law get married, Asha feels even more distressed. She does not like being married at such a young age and does not talk much with her mother or husband. Since her husband does not have parents, the housework falls on her and she worries about this increased burden.

Ruma: Koshi Province

Ruma's marriage took place in India, close to Nepal, where it is easy to go back and forth. Her new family consists of her husband, his mother, father, one elder brother, two younger brothers and one younger sister. Ruma's sister-in-law's family is also close to her house.

Ruma first met her Hari when she was with her sister-in-law's family. Hari had a grocery store, and Ruma used to go there to buy things. They would often talk for hours. When Ruma's mother learned about their love affair, she was unhappy because Ruma's husband didn't have a good house or much land. That was the main reason her mother didn't like Hari.

Ruma fell in love with Hari and after two years she and Hari married with her family's consent. Ruma was 16 and was able to secure her father's consent, even though her mother and brother were unsatisfied. She had a son within one year of marriage and became pregnant again six months later. When her son was 16 months old, Ruma gave birth to a daughter. Since both of her children were born through cesarean section, Ruma's deliveries were difficult, and her doctor scolded her in the hospital. Now her family consists of her husband, her mother-in-law, her two children, and her father-in-law, who lives and works in Punjab, India.

Ruma's daily life is much the same as other village women. She wakes up to clean the house, prepare food and feed the children. She sends her son to school, then moves the cattle and gathers manure. She has a lot of work to do at home. Unfortunately, she doesn't have a good relationship with her mother-in-law. Soon after marriage, her husband beat her, especially after coming home drunk at night. Ruma has to wait until 10:00 p.m. for husband to have his food and if she doesn't stay, Hari will beat her badly. Unable to bear domestic violence, Ruma filed a complaint with the police. The police filed a paper indicating that if Ruma is beaten again, action will be taken. That's why Hari has stopped beating her.

Life before and after marriage and children are entirely different. Before marriage, Ruma's life was enjoyable and happy: she used to study and could "stand on her own feet". But marriage has left Ruma limited by family responsibilities and feeling as though no one at home loves her. Luckily, her husband is being more loving to her again.

Riti: Sudurpashchim Province

In a small town in Sudurpashchim Province, 16-year-old Riti, filled with dreams and aspirations, Riti lived with her mother and two younger sisters. Riti's family faced hardships over the years. Her father was a troubled man who often mistreated and physically abused her mother. Over time, Riti's father's behaviour worsened Riti and he eventually abandoned them and married another woman when she was very young. Riti's mother was left to face the challenges of raising three daughters alone. Riti often wondered why her father left, but the answers remained elusive. Life became difficult for Riti's mother as she tried to manage an overwhelming financial burden and struggled to provide even basic needs for her daughters. Riti could see the toll things were taking on her mother's health.

One day, Riti met a boy named Arjun, who came from a modest but supportive family. They were both studying in the seventh standard and would talk at school since Riti did not have a mobile phone. They quickly formed a bond and fell in love. As Riti and Arjun spent more time together, they realized that they wanted to build a life together. They both understood the challenges that Riti had faced throughout her life. Riti's primary concern was her family's financial struggles and the burden it caused her mother and younger sisters.

Riti thought that by getting married, she could relieve the financial burden her mother carried and ensure a better future for her sisters. Riti shared these heartfelt thoughts and concerns with Arjun. After discussing their options, Riti and Arjun made a mutual decision to get married, with the hope of easing the financial burden on her family.

Riti left her home, went to Arjun's house and they later got married. Arjun's family welcomed her in and gave her the love, respect and support she had been lacking. Arjun's family has been able to meet the basic needs for both of them. Despite getting married at a young age, Riti and Arjun were aware of the challenges that could arise. They understood the importance of education and Arjun continued his studies. Riti and Arjun were aware of the risks associated with early marriage, including the potential challenges of adolescent pregnancy so she decided to plan to have a baby after she turned 20. After Riti had settled into life in her new home, her mother and estranged father started visiting her. They have been able to witness the happiness that has come into her life. Now Riti is living happily and Arjun has assured Riti that she will finish her studies once he has completed his education.

***Names of participants of case studies have been changed to maintain confidentiality.*

Annex II WORK PLAN

Activities	November				December				January				February				March				April					
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th		
Desk Review																										
Proposal Development																										
Brief joint Meeting(objectives)																										
Qualitative Research Training																										
Tool finalization workshop																										
Proposal finalization meeting																										
Ethical approval																										
Appointment of the Enumerator																										
Orientation to field enumerators																										
Field mobilization																										
Information Analysis																										
Incorporation of available review and feedback, and share preliminary report to NHRC and UNICEF team																										
Final Report preparation, dissemination and submission																										

Annex III TRANSECT WALK REPORTS

Bagmati Province

Bagmati Province, Nepal's second-most populated and fifth largest province, has an area of 20,300 km² (13.79 per cent of the total area of Nepal). The varied and diverse nature of its topography and altitude begins from the tundra and arctic climatic zone and the high Himalayas in the north, 5,000 metres above sea level. The Siwalik region is to the south and is a sub-tropical climatic zone at 500–1,000 metres. A variety of indigenous, ethnic and marginalized communities reside in Bagmati Province. According to this purposive sampling, the Chepang and Tamang communities from Dhading District and the Bote community from Chitwan District were chosen due to a high prevalence of child marriage.

On 23 May 2023, a team of four researchers took a microbus to Chitwan and disembarked at Benighat Rorang Municipality in Dhading District due to heavy traffic and road maintenance. Because there was a ward meeting in the municipality, the team was introduced to municipality staff and engaged in informal talks. One photo with information about child marriage was beside the main entrance of the building. The ward chairperson assigned the team to wards with a high prevalence of child marriage: Ward No. 6 which had a high Chepang population, and Ward No. 1 which had a high Tamang population.

The team first selected Bungpung, a Chepang community facing Chitwan District. It was a primitive Chepang settlement located at the bottom of the river bank at land level. Chepang students were seen carrying their school books and vegetables in their hands. Some carried a sibling, vegetables and their school books. The students didn't have proper bags and were struggling to walk on the sloping, rocky path while wearing flip-flops. Curious, the team asked the students if they were taking the vegetables to sell but they were carrying them to their teachers at the secondary school in Syaadul. The students told the team that they went to school every day carrying vegetables and climbed one and a half hours each way on the difficult path. It was clear that the community relied on vegetable farming with students carrying gourds, jackfruit, peas and pumpkin leaves.

On the way to the community, the team met an adolescent mother who said she was having excessive pain in one breast and was going to Gajuri for treatment. Her baby was being carried by another child. Heading towards the community, the team talked with adolescents and children working in fields and at their houses. Once the team reached the community school, they talked with school teachers and began to conduct community observations and build rapport. Throughout the visit, the team conducted in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and *kuragraphy*.

The team was surrounded by fields of maize, jackfruit trees and vegetables and received local bananas from one of the villagers. A downpour of rain started and the team reached one of the houses where water was leaking everywhere inside. The team stayed there for almost two hours. Next, they walked towards an alcohol shop and talked with community people. The community members shared many things about their culture, traditions and marriage. The team continued on to other houses to explore and conduct conversations and observations. They saw small boys cutting leaves from trees and built rapport with people in the village including young school children,

adolescents, parents and grandparents. Two children were catching and eating flying insects that looked like a small dragonfly. Most of the villagers seemed to be drunk during the day and evening. The team cooked their dinner and stayed one night at a primary school near the community.

The next day the team traveled to Simtaar, a Tamang community in Ward No. 1 that sits atop the hillside of Dhading District and faces Makwanpur District. It took almost five hours for the team to get there from the highway. Himalayan fruits such as *aiselu*, *chutro* and *kaafal* (types of local berries) and banana and plums were growing, due to the humid climate.

The team met a ward chairperson and coordinated their time there. They ate a community dish of local mushrooms and plums while building rapport with community members. There were many houses inside the community. Other communities could be seen further out, on the next slopes. The team walked through fields to reach community members' homes and conducted informal talks with adolescents, young children, female community health volunteers, senior citizens and other people in the community. Many children were in Kathmandu, Hetauda and other cities for education and job opportunities. The team then scattered to different houses to make the participants feel more comfortable gathering data..

Needed to collect information from a third community, the team went to Bharatpur Sub-Metropolitan City Office. The team approached the Department of Women and Children for another level of coordination and to identify a Bote community with a high prevalence of child marriage. They finally determined they would study Ward No. 28.

It was extremely hot in Chitwan causing team members to feel dizzy and dehydrated. The Bote community was scattered in different places at Sukumbaasi Tole and near the Jitpur Ward Office. Among the Bote community, families included Kumal, B.K. and others. People who had taken part in child marriage and/or were adolescent mothers were observed in each house. Fish nets were also hanging in the community.

Each house had papaya and mango trees, along with vegetables and maize in their backyards. Some groups of people were preparing vegetable ferns to sell and others had brought live fish for dinner. The community seemed quite patriarchal: males would gather outside and play cards, whereas females performed household work at home. The team requested mangoes and papayas and shared their snack with community members. They had many informal talks about the living situation, problems they encounter and other experiences. Throughout these conversations, the team observed the adolescent mothers. While people from the Bote community were the team's main focus, they also had detailed conversations with people from other castes and communities. The team completed the interviews and *kuragraphy* on the second to last day and returned to Kathmandu on 6 June 2023.

Gandaki Province

Gandaki Province has 11 districts, 26 municipalities, 58 rural villages and 85 local levels. Pokhara, the metropolitan city, is also the capital. The team arrived in Pokhara from Kathmandu on 23 May 2023 for a 15-day tour and traveled to Rishing Rural Municipality in Tanahu District. Rishing is on the border of Nawalparasi by road and along the banks of Kali Gandaki River. According to local legend, Rishi was named after Sringa Rishi, who performed an atonement in this area during *satya yuga*.

The team coordinated with the rural municipality and wards, requesting assistance and cooperation with the study. The municipality chose localities with Dalit and Magar communities, and the team went to Bhirkot and Kahu to meet the target groups.

The team reached the Magar settlement, and had conversations with people in the community, with cooperation from the local representatives and the ward chairperson. The Magar community is famous for its traditional folk music and dances (such as *kauda* and *rodi*) which are performed during feasts and festivals. Some of these festivals are occasions where boys and girls meet, fall in love and get married. In this community, it is customary to marry at a young age, leave school immediately after marriage, and go abroad for employment after child marriage.

The team then traveled to Bhirkot along a gravel road to interview members of the Dalit community where they were welcomed by the health post chief, ward chairperson and teachers. Bhirkot is a settlement with people from the Chhetri, Dalit, Gurung, Magar and Newar communities. The team studied a Dalit settlement where child marriage is very common.

When the team first arrived, people from the Dalit community were cautious about participating with the research team. After explaining the objectives of the study, the community willingly engaged with the researchers. Marrying at a young age, having children, moving abroad and dropping out of school were also common issues.

Next, the research team visited two Tanahu communities then headed to Barpak Sulikot Rural Municipality, a remote settlement of Gorkha District. They reached Palkhu, a touristic area, via a dusty road. Here, the team studied the marginalized Baram community. In coordination and collaboration with community members, including the Municipal Chief, Deputy Chief, health department and Department of Women and Children, the team went to Gairigau, a Baram community with a high prevalence of child marriage. There, the team learned that, at one time, the municipality conducted language classes to promote Baram language and writing. High rates of school drop-out and limited employment opportunities were observed, with daily wage earners, including carpenters, going abroad for work.

The team also learned that it is customary for adolescents to talk on the phone and arranged marriages are common, though *rodi* is not a tradition. The team did not observe a dowry system until they reached three Tanahu and Gorkha communities. It also seemed to be common to marry at a young age and not register the marriage or the birth of a child. One promising result was the team's sense that child marriage can be prevented by providing education, access to health and youth-oriented programmes and the strict enforcement of laws.

Karnali Province

Tripurasundari Municipality is in Dolpa District, Karnali Province and was established in 2017 as a local government of Nepal. The total area of the municipality is 393.54 square km (approximately 151.95 square miles) and is divided into 11 wards with a total population of 10,104 (41).

The team visited Dailekh and Dolpa Districts in Karnali Province from 23–28 April 2023 to study child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in the Raute and Budha Magar communities. The team traveled to Nepalgunj from Kathmandu and continued to Surkhet via a local vehicle where they stayed one night. They reached Bhairavi Rural Municipality the next day and coordinated with Bhairavi Rural Municipality and the chairperson, who took them to a Raute community and the Raute village chief.

The Raute community is a nomadic community situated in a remote area one hour from the *palika* office between the jungle and the Bhairavi Stream. There were 43 households scattered across the plains near the stream and their temporary housing was covered by very old tents and tied with wooden pillars. Not much surrounded the settlement: there were no education or health facilities; no drinking water; and sanitation and hygiene conditions were poor. They had *khalde chaepi* (raw or pit toilets) but also used the stream and forest for toileting. Silver pots were used to carry water, and food was prepared in the silver pots on stone ovens. Community members wore traditional clothes that they prepared themselves, and unmarried girls wore *pote mala* (traditional beaded necklaces). The workload of the females seemed double that of the males.

During the team's visit, the females were busy bringing water from the tap, cooking and feeding their families. Some were also busy preparing for *Vaishakh Purnima* – the birth anniversary of Lord Gautama Buddha. The community seemed to have high expectations of the research team.

Approximately 2 km away in Shrestha is a local hotel with a shop where people from the Raute community buy Coke, Fanta, Sprite and tea. They take turns going to the shop to exchange *khudra*, or loose change. Female members of the Raute community are strictly prohibited from speaking to others or to anyone who is unknown. They are also not allowed to express their views without the permission of their husband, father or village chief. They requested 50 to 100 rupees from the researchers, saying they would only talk if they received the money, otherwise they might leave. When the team returned to the field, four Raute females were coming from the jungle with loads of firewood. When a researcher requested a photograph with them, an older woman, then the other women, demanded money in exchange for a photo.

The Sarkis community is situated in a high, sloping area absent of livelihood opportunities. While the area was incredibly beautiful, the lifestyle of the community seemed very difficult. The entry into the Sarki community was narrow and dirty and WASH conditions were poor. During the rainy season, flowing water caused the local road to become very muddy. Most of the homes were small, narrow and dark with muddy roofs. Some households reared horses to transport food and other goods from Dunai, Jufal and Jajarkot. Tripurasundari Temple was situated at the top of settlement where community members would visit and worship.

Everyone was dependent on daily wage labour and masonry to earn money. During the day, most of the houses were closed. Males went to work or drove tractor; females went to the jungle with cattle; and children were at school, making it difficult to meet entire families in each household. One secondary school was located near the Sarki community, but very few of the Sarki children attended. There was a high prevalence of child marriage but family members and the ward chairperson tried to hide this.

Rassi village is situated at the top of Dolpa District where the Magar Kham live together in various settlements, including the Dandagaun and Gumbagaun settlements. It is a seven hour walk to Rassi village along a sloping terrain. While a dirt road is being constructed to connect Bagar and Rassi, it has not yet reached Rassi, so community members rely on horses for local transportation. One lower secondary school and one health unit are present. After students finish at the local school, they can go to a school in Ruma for further studies. But this is nearly impossible, so most of them dropout after lower secondary level. Notable was the gender balance in the Budha Magar community and females are accepted as primary decision makers.

WASH conditions were very poor in the village and it was muddy everywhere. The community built a communal toilet in between five or six homes, which is available for guests that visit the village. Absent are clean drinking water, telephone towers and internet facilities. Most of the youth do not drink alcohol. Because of the highly vertical, sloping geography, potatoes are cultivated in and around the village. Most of the cultivated land was held up by a retaining (gabion) wall and an ox was used to plough the field. Otherwise, Yarshagumba, a caterpillar fungus known for its medicinal properties, is the main source of livelihood that the entire community works together to collect. The place where Yarshagumba is found is a two-day journey from the village, and the community travels and lives there for two months from May or June (*Jeth*) to June or July (*Asar*).

New visitors are assumed to be government workers or politicians and children asked the research team if they were Maoist or UML (this also happened in the Tripurasundari Sarki community). Most of the families in this community were very welcoming to guests, providing hot water and black coffee stored in thermoses. The community members preferred salty tea, which they called *bhote chiya*. This type of tea is typical for mountainous people and they had their own process for preparing it. (They heated hot water over a fire of bamboo or wood, mixed nauni ghee (a type of butter) and salt and poured it in a thermos to drink later.)

Koshi Province

Koshi Province is the easternmost province in Nepal and is rich in natural resources, tourist attractions and recreational activities. The province covers an area of 25,905 km² (about 17.5 per cent of the country's total area) with the industrial city of Biratnagar as its capital. The province covers major eastern towns and several mountains including Mount Everest, Kangchenjunga and Ama Dablam. Koshi River, the largest river of the nation, is the western boundary of Koshi Province.

Marginalized communities were identified from Jhapa and Ilam districts from Koshi Province. When the team reached Gauriganj Municipality, the municipality leaders suggested studying the Gangai and Santhal communities. The team first went to the Gangai community, which borders India, to conduct key informant interviews with the ward chairperson, school teachers and representatives from the Department of Women and Children. With the help of female community health volunteers, the team identified married couples who had married before the age of 20, along with their parents and unmarried peers. The team also conducted *kuragraphy* with police, senior citizens and traditional healers.

Next, the team went to the Santhal community in the same municipality, also along the Indian border. Key informant interviews were conducted with the ward chairperson and, with the help of female community health volunteers, two couples who married before age 20 were identified. The team conducted in-depth interviews with the couples, their parents and unmarried peers.

With the help of Ilam's District Development Office, the research team selected Gurung and Rai communities in Sandakpur Municipality. Brahmin and Chhetri communities also live throughout this area. The municipality roads are in the process of being developed, making travel to Sandakpur Ward No. 1 extremely challenging. Despite the road conditions, the communities were incredibly welcoming.

Heading towards Sandakpur Rural Municipality by bus the team reached the Birtamode Bus Park in Padajunge and continued through many villages to Deurali where Sandakpur Rural Municipality is located. The team coordinated with the municipality office, discussed the objective of the study and planned a meeting with the chairperson of Sandakpur Rural Municipality.

When asked which ward had the highest prevalence for early marriage and adolescent pregnancy, the chairperson and a leader in the municipality suggested studying in Ward No. 1. A key informant interview was conducted with the ward chairperson who suggested the team meet the ward chairperson from a Gurung community. The team stayed with the Gurung community for five days and conducted key informant interviews with the female community health volunteers, and in-depth interviews with married adolescent girls and boys, their parents and unmarried peers. *Kuragraphy* was conducted with a grandmother and the police.

Lumbini Province

Lumbini Province in western Nepal is the third-largest province by area and population and home to the World Heritage Site of Lumbini. According to Buddhist tradition, this is where Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism was born. Lumbini is a small town currently being developed to become the provincial capital. Major cities in this province include Butwal and Siddhartha Nagar in Rupandehi District, Nepalgunj in Banke District, Tansen in Palpa District, and Ghorahi and Tulsipur in Dang District.

The research team selected the Tharu and Chaudhary communities in Dang District and the Gharti Magar community in Pyuthan District as purposive samples for the study. From Kathmandu, the team traveled to Pyuthan District and Pyuthan Municipality to meet the secretary of the mayor and learned about the marginalized communities in the district. Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives from the Department of Women and Children to learn about child marriage in the district. They suggested the team study the Gharti Magar community in Ward No. 6 There, the team conducted key informant interviews with the ward chairperson, female community health volunteers and school teachers.

With the help of school teachers and female community health volunteers, the team selected two married couples, their parents and unmarried peers for in-depth interviews. *Kuragraphy* took place with police, senior citizens, and traditional healers. The team stayed in the community for four days studying the behavioural determinants of child marriage.

Next, the team moved to Dang District, which has a high population of the marginalized Chaudhary community. In Ghorahi sub-metropolitan office, the team conducted key informant interviews with the Deputy Mayor of the Municipality and the Chief of the Department of Women and Children. They suggested, going to Ward No. 17 where the team conducted a key informant interview with a school teacher. A female community health volunteer facilitated in-depth interviews with two married couples, their parents and unmarried peers. At the ward office, a key informant interview was conducted with the ward chairperson.

The research team moved onto the Badi community, which is an indigenous people group of Nepal. Focal persons from the Badi community shared about behavioural patterns related to marriage, and key informant interviews were conducted with the ward chairperson of Ward No. 13. The team also interviewed the community's school teacher, couples married before the age of 20 and their parents and unmarried peers. *Kuragraphy* was conducted with traditional healers (dhami), police and senior citizens to learn more about the community patterns related to child marriage.

Madhesh Province

Janakpur, or Janakpur, is a sub-metropolitan city in Dhanusha District, a hub for religious and cultural tourism, and the capital of Madhesh Province. Janakpur is located about 225 km south-east of Kathmandu and is the largest sub-metropolitan city in Nepal and one of the fastest growing cities. Along with top-notch medical facilities, Janakpur boasts parks, private schools, colleges and internet service providers.

On 26 March 2023, the research team traveled by plane to Janakpur. After exploring the city, the team split up and visited the District Health Directorate, Sapahi village and a nearby community. They met back at the sub-metropolitan office to share information about the study and request visits with the Muslim (Lohana Tole) and Chamaar communities.

Starting with the Muslim community, the team met with a female community health volunteer and asked about the prevalence of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. She said there are no cases of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in her community. The team then went to explore the community independently and met a retired social worker who was eager to help. He offered the team Coke as they spoke in detail about the study objective.

According to the social worker, child marriage does happen but people are very reluctant to talk about it. He said the people will open up if they take the time to develop relationships with them and suggested the research team stay for some time. The research team stayed in the social workers home and developed relationships with all of his family members, including his daughter. In the evenings, she would take the team to visit houses and, since it was *Roja* (Rumadan), families would have their meals in the evening. The research team was often invited to share in the meal. In this way, the team learned about the community and its culture, traditions and values. What was particularly striking to the research team was the communities' commitment to their Muslim traditions and their strong sense of community. They were very disciplined and their children adhered to their parent's decisions. In the end, they opened up about their child marriage practices.

In the Chamaar community, people at first seemed to ignore the research team. The team started to build rapport by helping with work in the community and speaking in the local language.

To meet with the Musahar community where the prevalence of early marriage and adolescent pregnancy is high, the team went to Ekdara Municipality where they suggested going to Bhatauliya, Ward No. 3. The walk from Ekdara Rural Municipality to Bhatauliya was full of natural beauty including meandering rivers and towering trees that provided a sense of tranquility. The coexistence of different religious structures showcased the harmony and unity among the residents of Ekdara. The transect walk provided opportunity to witness intriguing aspects of daily life, including people grazing their cows and buffaloes in open fields.

The Musahar community is a marginalized group divided into two localities: Purwari Mushar Tole and Pachhiyari Mushar Tole. The researchers decided to stay in the community and build rapport with the people. In one home, they were offered breakfast, lunch at another and dinner at the home of a female community health volunteer: all of whom were very friendly. One community person was indispensable in assisting the team and searching for households with known cases of child marriage. Interesting discoveries made during the research were that arranged marriage was more common than love marriage, many young boys were involved in foreign employment and the school dropout rate was very high.

Madhesh Province (Janakpur and Jaleshwar) was beautiful and rich – especially in the religious aspect of life. The roads were smooth and most people spoke in their local Maithili language. The research team discovered that if one can win the hearts of the people, no community will be too difficult to explore.

Sudurpashchim Province

Rumaroshan is a rural municipality in Achham District in the far-western Sudurpashchim Province of Nepal. With a population of 25,166, Rumaroshan has a land area of 173.33 km and is 42 km from the district headquarter of Mangalsen. It is easily accessible by gravel road and is in the middle of three districts: Achham, Bajura and Kalikot.

The diversity of ethnicity and castes includes Chhetri, Dalit, Damai/Dholi, Hill Brahmin, Kami, Lohar and Thakuri. Local languages spoken were Achhami, Magar and Nepali and while a majority of people were Hindus there were also Christians in the region.

On 24 April 2023, the team traveled to Achham from Dhangadhi to Rumaroshan Rural Municipality, though the roads were very difficult for travel. The team went to Rumaroshan Rural Municipality where they stayed overnight at the ward office.

The next morning, the team went to the *palika* where they suggested the team go to the Chhetri and Dalit communities. This was somewhat difficult as the households were scattered and quite far. The team established rapport with the members of the villages and they provided assistance going from house to house. The climate was much colder than Kathmandu and vegetables were scarce, so people subsisted on soup, noodles and *roti*, or flatbread. Most of the young adults had left the community in search of foreign employment and education. The Dalit community was very happy to have the research team visit their homes and were very receptive to their questions. Elopement seemed to be the most common form of marriage, as parents tended to be busy with their work and were not able to pay much attention to their children.

The team also visited Rumaroshan, a tourist destination with an impressive array of sedimentary rock cliffs that villagers ascend to extract honey.

In Dhangadhi, the team continued their research and discovered the community had a high prevalence for child marriage in several wards. As suggested by the metropolitan city personnel, the team ended their data collection at Urma Gaau where, one by one, they found cases of child marriage.

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