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BEHAVIOURAL DETERMINANTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY IN NEPAL: A qualitative study 2024

A POLICY BRIEF



Background

Child marriage has affected a staggering 700 million women worldwide and 5 million adolescents in Nepal, including 1.5 million who are under the age of 15. Also called early marriage, child marriage refers to any formal or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child(1). The establishment of the global minimum marriage age of 18 prompted Nepal to amend the legal age of marriage to 20 for both males and females in 2017(2). Despite a variety of legal and

policy actions, Nepal still has a high prevalence of child marriage and ranks eighth in the world and third in South Asia(1). Recognizing the need to address the drivers and detrimental consequences of child marriage – including economic factors, limited mobility and education, compromised health, rising adolescent pregnancy and heightened risk of violence – UNICEF partnered with the Nepal Health Research Council to investigate these issues with a focus on marginalized communities.

The resulting study, *Behavioural Determinants on Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Nepal: A qualitative study*, has unveiled critical insights crucial for policy reform and societal progress. Commendable advancements in reducing child marriage rates in Nepal has occurred over the past decade – in part through innovative campaigns such as *Beti Padhau Beti Bachau* (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) in Madhesh Province and *Bank Khata Chhoriko Suraksha Jivan Variko* (Bank Account of Daughter for Her Security Forever) in Karnali Province. Yet the practice of marrying before the age of 20 persists in certain regions and communities, indicating an urgent need for new interventions(3).

According to this qualitative study of marginalized communities in Nepal, conducted between April and June 2023, family pressure, societal expectations and economic challenges contribute to early marriages in Chhetri, Chamaar and Dalit communities. Economic constraints often push families to prioritize marriage over education, affecting adolescents' futures, as was found in Chepang communities. The Gharti Magar, Santhal and Gangai communities voice concern about gender bias, including favouring and prioritizing sons' education over daughters', leading to higher school dropout rates among girls. Similar conditions for girls were reported in the Chepang and Sarki communities, impeding their education and careers.

Cultural complexities, especially in Muslim and Musahar communities, hinder girls' schooling after marriage due to restrictive norms for daughters-in-law pursuing education and discomfort in wearing traditional marriage attire to school. Health issues such as adolescent pregnancy, malnutrition and mental health concerns prevail in the Sarki, Kham Magar, Santhaal, Gangai and Chaudhary communities, warranting improved health education. Economic

burdens and suicides are linked to early marriages, as reported in the Santhal, Gangai, Kham Magar and Gurung communities. Despite the awareness and legality surrounding child marriage, challenges persist in law enforcement due to underreporting, as acknowledged by police personnel across all seven provinces.

Findings indicate that adolescents aged 14–18 years in Badi, Bote, Chaudhary and Santhal communities exhibit high dependency on mobile phones, primarily utilizing social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok and WhatsApp to connect with friends and make other social connections. This reliance on mobile communication heightens the risk of early marriage. Study participants reported the use of mobile phones to exchange numbers, engage in conversations and subsequently enter into marriage, often with strangers outside of the community. Conversely, arranged marriages prevail among communities in the Terai, including Musahar, Chamaar and Muslim communities. Upholding family dignity and reputation is the primary motivation for such marriages, and concerns over social status and complying with familial traditions drive parents to prioritize arranged marriages. Additionally, discussions with grandparents during the Kuragraphy sessions revealed a preference for child marriage, citing its potential for deeper understanding between the girl and boy, contrasting with past practices where spouses were unfamiliar and significant age gaps were common.

► Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the pressing need for targeted policy changes and interventions to effectively combat child marriage in Nepal. To address this issue comprehensively, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

► Engagement of family members

Effectively engage family members to prevent child marriage. Deploy educational campaigns and social mobilizers to conduct family counselling sessions targeting all family 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 adolescent health, education 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.

► Educational campaign on the consequences of social media

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

► School health programmes

Integrate a comprehensive training into school health programmes, specifically targeting teachers, to enhance awareness and prevention efforts regarding early marriage, early pregnancy and reproductive health. Teachers serve as primary sources of information reaching children and their families, thus empowering them with accurate knowledge and resources is pivotal. The 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 other influencers within communities who can reach and provide positive guidance to children. This may include school nurses, community leaders, local health workers, peer educators and religious leaders, among others. Incorporate child marriage, reproductive health and adolescent pregnancy as a mandatory element in school curriculum starting from Grade 6.

► Vocational training

Incorporate vocational training initiatives into intervention programmes and tackle one root cause of child marriage by addressing poverty-driven aspirations, developing employment skills and opportunities, and improving economic factors. Challenge misconceptions about child marriage and promote alternative pathways to sustainable livelihoods by incorporating key messages that emphasize its negative consequences, including limiting educational and economic possibilities. 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 financially support their families. This proactive approach will address immediate financial needs and empower individuals to make informed choices about their futures, ultimately reducing the prevalence of child marriage and fostering economic resilience within communities.

► Safeguarding child rights

Use 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 should facilitate the implementation of existing laws, providing frameworks and resources to effectively support reporting mechanisms. 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.

Include adolescents in decision-making processes and programme development to better understand their needs and concerns. Their perspectives can aid in the development of effective interventions and policies aimed at preventing child marriage and promoting children's overall well-being.

In conclusion, the findings of this study serve as a clear call for immediate and concerted action. By implementing these policy recommendations, Nepal can make substantial strides in eradicating child marriage and its impacts and ensuring a brighter, more equitable future for young girls and boys.

References

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