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

A METHODOLOGY PAPER

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(3). 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*, employed an exploratory qualitative approach to understand

these complex issues. Before conducting the fieldwork, an extensive literature review investigated health, education, behaviour and socioeconomic factors to provide foundational insights. Integrated with existing knowledge, the research aimed to identify gaps with a unique set of exploration methods.

The study focused on marginalized communities and aimed to understand behavioural drivers and consequences associated with child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. It was conducted between November 2022 to April 2023, across seven provinces, with a balanced representation covering the mountain, hill and Terai regions. A purposive sampling was utilized for participant selection, with secondary data on child marriage collected before the desk review. Thirty-six participants were selected from each province, totaling 252 participants from seven provinces. The sampling size was determined based on the theory of information saturation, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter through repeated thematic patterns. All interviews were conducted ethically: researchers obtained participant consent and adhered to health research requirements in Nepal.

1. In-depth interviews and key informant interviews

In-depth interviews and key informant interviews served as foundational methodologies in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted with 168 participants including married couples, parents, unmarried adolescents, government officials, community leaders and traditional healers. This method provided a confidential platform for participants to articulate personal stories, experiences and perspectives regarding child marriage. It also fostered an atmosphere of trust, enabling individuals to open up about sensitive topics. For example, parents from the Kham Magar community in Dolpa, Karnali Province, shared about marrying their sons at a young age so their young brides, who are known to have good eyesight, can collect Yarshagumba, a valuable medicinal herb.

Simultaneously, 84 key informant interviews garnered expert opinions and insights from influential figures. Interviewees included female community health volunteers, school teachers, ward chairpersons and representatives from the Department of Women and Children, which is under the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens. Participants provided key information about the drivers and consequences of child marriage and early pregnancy in their communities. For example, the ward chairperson of Chitwan in Bagmati Province shared that economic factors prevent children from pursuing education. As a result, adolescents opt to look for employment to earn money.

Impact: In-depth interviews uncovered deeply rooted emotions and personal stories, shedding light on individual experiences and perceptions of child marriage. Key informant interviews offered expert perspectives, enriching our understanding with informed viewpoints crucial for policy formulation.

2. Socio-ecological model

The socio-ecological model served as a guiding framework during the analysis of qualitative data, acknowledging the complex interplay of factors influencing child marriage. This model facilitated the exploration of multiple layers – from individual beliefs to societal norms and environmental influences – providing a comprehensive understanding from different perspectives (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1 **Socio-ecological model**

POLICY
COMMUNITY
ORGANIZATIONAL
INTERPERSONAL
INDIVIDUAL
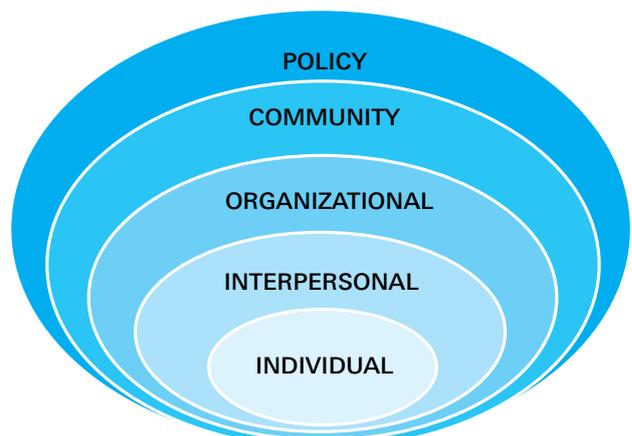
Significance: The socio-ecological model broadened the scope beyond individual behaviours, emphasizing the interconnectedness of societal, cultural and environmental factors influencing child marriage. This model helps to explain that early marriage is a complex issue, influenced by multiple factors at multiple levels. One key finding illustrates the various levels of influence: mobile phone use as a driver of child marriage. At the individual level, early access to mobile phones fosters dependency and social media addiction, leading to behaviours like easily trusting strangers and prioritizing phone ownership. Parental factors, such as busy schedules and lack of guidance, contribute to children's unchecked phone use. School environments, with lenient rules, facilitate distraction from studies and engagement in inappropriate online activities. Social norms influenced by platforms like Facebook, TikTok and WhatsApp contribute to the normalization of early marriage, mostly among peers. These dynamics interplay with broader societal influences, such as cultural perceptions of marriage and technology usage.

3. Transect walks

A transect walk involves walking through, or transecting, a community to observe the daily activities and surroundings of a place. Questions, listening and observing the environmental and social resources can reveal the risks, conditions, systems and vulnerabilities of a community. When used as a participatory tool, transect walks can involve community members in the observation process. To capitalize on these benefits, the research team conducted transect walks across all seven provinces in 21 marginalized communities: Badi, Baram, Bote, Chamaar, Chaudhary, Chepang, Chhetri, Dalit, Dalit (Biswokarma), Dalit (Sarki), Gangai, Gharti Magar, Gurung, Kham Magar, Magar, Musahar, Muslim, Rana Tharu, Raute, Santhal and Tamang.

Engaging communities through transect walks fostered collaboration and ensured that the perspectives of local residents were considered, enhancing the overall validity and relevance of the study. They revealed the location and distribution of resources, infrastructure, social interactions, landscapes, land use patterns and different activities taking place within a community. These walks also facilitated systematic observation of natural elements, built environments and social dynamics within the community. For example, in Bagmati Province, one unique observation was of students walking to school: they were walking up a long and steep slope laden with vegetables, their books and in some cases siblings. The transect walk revealed that the community was agricultural, with most community members engaging in vegetable farming. The children helped by taking the vegetables to the school teachers.

Uncovering truths: Transect walks revealed hidden patterns and connections between the physical environment and societal practices. Valuable insights emerged from the exploration of community spaces. This was the case in the Raute community in Dailekh, Karnali Province. Here, the trend of mismatched marriages *(anmel bibaha)* was highly prevalent where huge age gaps were observed between husbands and wives (e.g., one female was 12 years old and her husband was 40 years old). Other surprising realities of this traditionally nomadic community included all family members sleeping in a single room, the lack of toilets in houses and poor sanitation.

Gender-specific observations revealed distinct roles, with women primarily engaged in household tasks and childcare, while men were undertaking economic activities and socializing outside the home. Women and girls were dressed in traditional attire specific to the region, including sarees and kur*t*as, and communities in the Terai practic*ed ghumto pratha* – the tradition of covering women's faces with a shawl or part of a saree.

4. *Kuragraphy*

Kuragraphy, which derives from the Nepali word *"kura"* meaning conversation, is an anthropological, ethnographic method of data collection. It is a unique approach for conducting informal, unstructured conversations with people within the community of study, where questions emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of conversation. *Kuragraphy* lent itself to being distinctive, powerful and organic. It allowed for spontaneous, informal dialogues that evolved naturally, enabling participants to share candid thoughts and experiences(4).

Unveiling hidden storie*s: Kuragraphy* provided a platform for community members to express viewpoints that traditional interview settings might constrain. By blending seamlessly into the community and engaging in informal conversations at tea shops or communal spaces, participants felt more at ease, revealing detailed insights and personal anecdotes on child marriage. For instance, a unique insight emerged regarding the Chepang community's marriage ritual*, khoji khane*, where a young girl's parents ask if their daughter is participating in the marriage willingly (i.e., "in happiness"). If she says no, she is returned to her parents, highlighting the importance of respecting a girl's choice in this cultural tradition.

5. Synergistic impact of methods

The fusion of diverse qualitative methodologies, notably *kuragraphy* and transect walks, allowed us to paint a vivid and comprehensive picture of the behavioural determinants of child marriage in Nepal. These methodologies transcended traditional research approaches, unearthing narratives and truths that would have otherwise remained concealed. The result is a greater understanding of the advocacy efforts required to eliminate child marriage, improve the lives of adolescents and ensure children's rights are secured.

References

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