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Early Marriage in Nepal: Prospects for Schoolgirls

By Nub Raj Bhandari¹

Abstract

Nepal has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world; the prevalence is even higher in Terai region. There has been an observable correlation between marriage and education leading to the general assumption that girls attending school are less likely to be married at an early age compared with counterparts that have either dropped out of school or have not been in school. This paper assesses the causality between school attendance and likelihood of marriage. The study relies on a qualitative assessment conducted at 5 schools in Dhanusha, a district in Province 2 of Nepal. Participants in the assessment included 60 schoolgirls from grade 9 to 10. Interviews were conducted where participants were familiarized with previous research reports on marital age and education, national statistics and legal documents on child marriages. From the outcomes of the interviews, the girls noted that their society, neighbors, senior citizens in their community, relatives and religious leaders were the primary agents of solicitations for marriage proposals to a family and that the activity began when a girl reached the age of thirteen. There was significant indication from the interviews that schoolgirls were not immune from early marriage.

Keywords: School drop-out, Early Marriage, Girls' Education, Nepal

Introduction

The globally accepted minimum age for marriage is 18 years for both males and females (UNICEF, 2007). In Nepal, the Criminal (Code) Act (2017) has formally adopted 20 years as the minimum age for marriage. Thus, marriage where one or both spouses are under 18 (or 20 in case of Nepal) is regarded as early (child) marriage. Nepal has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, ranked as the third highest in South Asia after Bangladesh and India (GON, 2016a). The Constitution of Nepal states that the rights to health and education are fundamental rights (GON, 2016b). Arguably, child marriage in its impact, specifically to education, is incongruous with the provision of these rights and is therefore in opposition to the fundamental rights guaranteed under the country's constitution.

Research shows that the educational participation rate among married girls is low. For girls aged 15 to 17, only 31.2% attended school (Sekine and Hodgkin, 2014). The research points to a seeming causality between marriage and educational participation where early marriage is correlated to either drop-out or non-participation in educational attainment. For this reason, there has been speculation that girls that have not been enrolled in school may be at high risk of early marriage (Plan Nepal et al., 2012). Given that causation of marriage at an early age remains speculative, this study explores the factors that may contribute to early marriage from the perspective of girls presently attending school and of marital age, which is non-conforming to legal and acceptable standards at 13 and above.

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Objectives

This study aims to answer the following questions from the perspectives of school-going girls:

- What are the major influencing factors contributing to the early marriage of schoolgirls?
- What could be the possible options to prevent underage schoolgirls from early marriage?

Literature Review

The literature review was compiled from a variety of sources including: legal documents, Nepal national reports, statistics, previous research reports and media evidence and is presented relative to the themes relevant to the present study.

Child Marriage and Girls' Education

Prior research indicates that there is a direct correlation between early marriage and education. Raj et al. (2009) noted that child marriage was most prevalent in households where mothers were illiterate or fathers had little education. This relationship between familial education and child marriage has been documented for some period of time. For many school-going girls the main reason for discontinuing school is reported to be marriage and subsequent pregnancy (Thapa et al., 1997). However, some research notes that school attendance may prevent early marriage. Young men and women in Nepal do not marry while they are in school, and the longer they stay in school, the later they are likely to marry (Choe et al. 2004). This, however, is inconsistent with findings that surface the notion that schooling may be a temporary activity for girls pending a marital match. Choe et al. (2004) note that school attendance does not decide the day of marriage rather marriage decides the schooling period. A girl is in school until the family finds a suitable match (Choe et al., 2004; Plan Asia and ICRW, 2013).

There are many contributing factors to educational participation, including the search for a marital partner and the need for additional household labor. For example, a girl could remain in school until a prospective groom is found, but the marriage may only be set when the boy's parents need help in home activities (Barr, 2016). Additionally, drop-out rates resulting from marriage may be related to superstitions and fear. There is a belief that educated women become witches; so, some families prevent the daughter in law from educational participation from the fear of her becoming a witch (Bhandari, 2017). As a result, women married at a young age are more likely to have dropped out of school and/or have no formal education (Sekine and Hodgkin, 2014).

After marriage, the opportunity to continue with schooling is minimal as girls take on housework and boys struggle to provide for a family they are too young to have (Barr, 2017). The risk of early marriage of girls is coincident with schooling age and increases significantly with each year following completion of primary education (Barr, 2017).

Social Factors of Schoolgirls' Early Marriage

Another incentive for early marriage is the cost to a girl's family; early marriage has a lower dowry. Parents have to pay more money if they organize marriage later (Plan Nepal, et al., 2012). The social norm of the dowry payment is more burdensome to poor families. Perczynska and Coyle (n.d.) found dowry payments to be correlated with families' poverty, lower educational level of the bride, and traditions (e.g. the younger and less educated the bride, the lower dowry requirement). Sah, et al. (2014) notes that early age marriage is associated with low education and being poor. The bridegroom's family fixes the price for their son and

if that much is not received from bride, she is subject to torture. The effect of dowry is so heavy that some parents encourage adolescents to initiate their own marriage to avoid the high costs associated with dowry or wedding (cited in UNFPA and UNICEF, n.d.). The latter marriage or “love marriage” therefore also is a contributing element to early marriage; however, these marriages may obscure the issue as they result from a financial motivation.

The findings of Girls Not Brides (GNB) Nepal (2015) highlight that many school age girls marry to avoid forced or arranged marriages or to escape from difficulties at home. Other studies have also revealed this as the cause of early marriage (Plan Nepal, et al. 2012). Alternatively, adolescents may also choose to elope, as sexual expression outside of marriage is not acceptable (Plan Nepal, et al. 2012; UNFPA and UNICEF, n.d.). Conversely, parents may fear that their girls may elope and with that fear, they marry their daughter earlier, again adversely impacting educational participation (Ganguly, 2015).

Bhandari (2017) finds that the thinking patterns differ between educated and uneducated families and within a family between the educated and uneducated parents; the educated parent emphasize the role of education relative to a job and society, whereas uneducated families and parents limit the value of the child to household chores. This signifies that the uneducated family and/or parent, given their limited perspective on the longitudinal benefit of education, is most likely to focus on the cost (dowry) and therefore focus more on the marriage of their child (Bhandari, 2017).

Some Statistics on Child Marriage

Research conducted by Plan Asia and ICRW (2013) reveals that child marriage prevalence in Bangladesh and India is 64% and 47% respectively. In Nepal, a survey of females in the age group 20 to 24 year old found that 39.5% had been married as of the age of 18 and 59.2 % of females were married by 20 (NDHS, 2016, p. 83). Correspondingly, only 10.3% of males of the same age cohort were found to have been married at 18. Unfortunately, the statistics have remained unchanged since 2001. The 2001 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) found that 40% of women aged 15 to 19 were married.

Table 1: Some Data Related to Early Marriage in Nepal

Women who are married by age of 18, among 20-24 age group	39.5%
Women who are married by age of 20, among 20-24 age group (Current legal age of marriage is 20)	59.2 %
Male married by age 18 among 20-24 age group	10.3%
School attendance of girls after marriage	31.2%
Out of school girls after marriage	68.8%
Child marriage through own desire	32.1%
Women aged 25-49 had initiated sexual intercourse by age 15	11%
First sexual intercourse by age 18	51%
First sexual intercourse by age 20	71%

Source: NDHS, (2016), p. 83; Sekine and Hodgkin, (2014); and Plan et al. (2012)

The data reveals that 32.1% of child marriages are occurring through a desire for children (Plan Nepal et al. 2012, p. ii). The main reason for a love marriage, according to the research, is their desire for sex. National statistics also reveal that 11% percent of women age 25-49 initiated sexual intercourse by age 15, while more than half (51%) reported having sexual intercourse by age 18 and 71% by age 20 (NDHS, 2016a).

Research Gap

In the existing literature, I found very little exploration of the perception of schoolgirls toward marriage. Given the cited relationship between education and early marriage, along with research that prompts a perception of free will toward early marriage, i.e. love marriage, interest in sex, it appeared that an evaluation of schoolgirls' perceptions would be beneficial to understanding the consensuality and interest in marriage of this population. This, therefore, became the rationale for the current study.

Methodology

I followed the interpretive research paradigm in conducting this study. According to Taylor, Kermode, and Roberts (2007), a paradigm is a broad view or perspective of something. So, interpretivism in this study is concerned with broad understanding of schoolgirls about early marriage. My epistemology is the existing social beliefs (created realities) that force girls' early marriage. There are many social, cultural and economic factors that sustain it. My ontology consists of social norms, which arguably need to be reinterpreted.

I used a qualitative research design and selected the study location and study population to then establish my samples. Based on the national statistics on marriage (CBS, 2011), I selected Province Number 2 where the early marriage rate is the highest. I listed all eight districts of Province Number 2 in hierarchical order on the basis of existing child marriage rate. From the list I selected Dhanusha district where the prevalence of child marriage is 85.99% (CBS, 2011). The population of the Dhanusha district is comprised of 84,860 female of ages 10 to 19 age group and represents 11.24 % of the district's population. The percent of males in the same age cohort is 12.44 % (CBS, 2011). To understand the perspectives of school-going girls and assemble a representative sample of the population of school-going girls in the district, I selected five schools at which to conduct my study: one from the north and south; one from district headquarters; and one adjoined to the Mahottari district. Sample sizes for each school are provided in Table 2. Within each of the schools, I selected 10 % of girls from grades 9 and 10.

Table 2: Samples

School Name	Total Samples
Shree Sankatmochan Higher Secondary School, Janakpur	36
Shree B.D.J. Higher Secondary School, Tulsiya Nikash	8
Shree Secondary School, Kurtha	6
Shree Ma. Bi. (Secondary School), Mulabari Bhiman	7
Shree Aadarsha Ma.Bi. (Secondary School), Lalghadh	3
Total	60

For collecting qualitative data, I prepared short open-ended questionnaires. The data collection was carried out spending one day in one school with the exception of Sankatmochan Higher School at Janakpur, where I spent four days. In the school, I did a short interview with each of the randomly selected schoolgirls aged 13-16, who comprised the school specific sample of 10% of their cohort. I analyzed the data using quality content analysis method and discussed with them secondary information and statistics.

Presentation of Data and Findings

The following section provides the empirical results of the interviews conducted. I organized the girls' opinions by specific themes that emerged and have allocated the discussion to the same by heading. These themes were evaluated against the available literature and the conclusions are provided.

Influencing Factors for Early Marriage

Table 1 presents statistics on female age at marriage. From the sample data participants noted having friends leave school after marriage and from their own grade, a few reported as being married, engaged, or in love and ready for self-marriage. The participants sadly expressed that their friend's marriages began from grade six. To avoid the dowry or to pay less dowry, the poorest families organized marriages for their daughters earlier. Schoolgirls are fully conscious that marriage is associated with low education and being poor. Few girls are married before age 15 due to strong parental religious beliefs related to female puberty. However, parental fear that a daughter might choose someone beyond their caste and community is catalyst to early marriage. The practice of self-marriage is also common in these schools. Neighbors and relatives frequently promote early marriage, by bringing marriage proposals to parents, while seniors of the family and society are often pressuring parents to marry daughters early. So, even if close to completion of their secondary schooling, girls can be married anytime.

The schoolgirls' view is that society, neighbors, seniors of the community, relatives and religious leaders start pressuring their parents to marry them starting at the age of thirteen. As a result, girls slowly begin to drop-out of school after thirteen. For girls who are unable to attend secondary school due to familial poverty and physical distance, the risk of early marriage is highest.

Relationship between Dowry and Marriage

Respondents are familiar with the existing dowry system in their society. They know how the dowry is associated with early marriage: more education and age demands more dowry. So to pay less dowry, parents arrange for the early marriage of their daughter. Participants expressed their preference for education in lieu of early marriage and communicated an opinion: 'no dowry but education'. They want to communicate this to their parents in a meaningful way even though they know that their opinion is given no consideration in both family and society. They want to convince their parents that they could also provide for the family and are equal to their brothers. They are confident that if girls (they) are provided education, they can also find a job and feed their parents.

It is obvious that marriage costs money. If parents weigh the costs of marriage relative to the costs of education, the status of their daughters could be increased. An educated girl could find a good bridegroom for whom dowry may not be required. Previous research shows that as women attain more education, their control over their choice of husband also increases (Barr, 2016). Schoolgirls have the opinion that, they should stand firmly and dare to say 'NO' to early marriage in front of their parents.

Relation between Early Marriage and Education

Early marriage is correlated with educational attainment (Sekine and Hodgkin, 2014; Barr, 2017). The majority of girls school drop out as a result of early marriage (Sekine and Hodgkin, 2014; Barr, 2017). According to the surveyed participants, continuation in education will increase the chance of late marriage.

The participants noted having marriage proposals as early as their enrollment in sixth or seventh grade. However, the poverty level of family plays crucial role in the acceptance.

Girls from the poorest families are at the most risk of marriage at this stage. The risk, then, heightens from grade eight to twelve. If a girl drops out of school for any reason, such as distance from school, household difficulties, or poverty, she is sure to be married. Reinforcing declining education participation, if the girls are married, they drop out of school. Most of the participants noted that their friends were married in the eighth and ninth grades.

Qualities of a Good Husband for Schoolgirls

I also analyzed the response of schoolgirls in terms of the qualities they are seeking in their husbands. The common attributes were that husbands should be independent, honest and educated. They opined that an educated husband is honest and independent and would allow them to have the opportunity to work and earn a living. If partnered with an uneducated husband, they noted they would wish that he would have some skills to earn an independent income. They noted that uneducated husbands are typically dependent on their parents' property for a sense of status and this results in the wife being a completely submissive worker.

Though teenagers and unmarried, respondents are familiar with the sufferings of a daughter in law. The husband's dependency on his parents is the major cause of suffering, as dependent husbands listen to parents, neighbors and society in lieu of the wife. The wife suffers due to his immaturity. Since all participants were below 20, they said any person under 20 could not decide right or wrong. So, an uneducated and underage husband is not their dream husband.

Girls want to choose the bridegroom by themselves and seek parents' consent. Their opinion is that, though it is good to find a husband with the qualities they would like, ultimately, a parents' agreement is needed.

Possible Option for Delaying Marriage

Regardless of girl's position within family and society, the participants noted a few concerns and reasons for delaying the age of marriage. The rationales conveyed and societal actions recommended are provided below:

- Every girl should focus on her studies
- Developing friendships and sharing knowledge
- Improve knowledge on the impact of early marriage through different means i.e. newspaper, television, street drama, etc.
- Inform parents about the harmful physical as well as psychological problems that arise from early marriage
- Inform society about the harmful traditions like dowry that push for early marriage
- Establish programs targeted to reducing and eliminating the use of alcohol in home or family
- Establish social norms that strongly object to child marriage
- Girls should have recourse from parental action related to arranging a child marriage and be able to have police assistance and intervention
- Campaign to convince family, parents and neighbors that child marriage can never be good for anyone

The participants also have the opinion that emotional appeals, such as statements addressing the parent-child relationship like, "Am I burden to you?" are a stronger means to draw a parent's attention than pleading with parents to abstain from finding a marital partner. A few participants relayed that their parents wanted them to continue their studies but were fearful that their daughter may become involved in an emotional or physical (sexual) love

affair. Even for the conscious family, these types of activities are against social norms. The family has to face negative social sanctions if their daughter or son is involved in an emotional or sexual affair. These girls noted that if they could convince their parents that they would never be involved in an affair their marriage could be delayed.

Participants noted that they often try their best to convince their friends not to marry early although they know it a useless effort. "Now we are 19 girls in our grade but anytime the number could be reduced. The next number may be my own," noted Kurtha, a tenth grader. Each participant noted that when a marriage is fixed, everyone remains silent and desperately accepts. They know that once their parents have accepted a proposal, it is impossible to stop the process. They believe that what is lacking is awareness among parents on the harmful effects of early marriage. As one participant shared, "Our parents should be educated and warned against early marriage and other harmful social practices." Education of neighbors and counseling of relatives are other ways to reduce early marriage because even the conscious or educated parents are influenced by the societal parties into marrying their daughter or son earlier.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the above findings and discussion, below are conclusions and recommendations of this study.

Conclusion

Social leaders, neighbors, senior citizens of the community, relatives and religious leaders are the primary influencing parties for early marriage. They typically are the initial persons to bring up the marriage proposal. Girls may refuse the proposal but their agreement is not needed to move forward and has little impact on the outcome. Their parents or families are the decision makers. If anything interrupts the first marriage proposal, the second proposal approaches very soon. The risk of early marriage keeps increasing in second, third or fourth proposal. Even in the case where there is evidence of parental sensitivity of the consequences of early marriage and a parental desire to further their daughter's education, broader societal networks and familial relationships influence their decision making in favor of prevailing social norms that foster early marriage. Interestingly, the romanticization of marriage following an initial proposal sometimes pushes girls to self-marriage at an early age.

The second conclusion of this study is that education and dowry are closely associated with early marriage. Previous research findings reveal that girls not in school or that have dropped out have the highest risk of early marriage. But based on the current study, the conclusion of the participants, who were schoolgirls, is that schoolgirls are equally in risk of early marriage. School-going girls are apparently well aware of the relationship between education and marriage. For these girls, starting at grade six, marriage proposals begin and the risk of marriage remains throughout schooling, increasing with age in cumulative fashion. Similarly, the volume of dowry also keeps increasing with a girl's education. For educated girls, an educated bridegroom is favored, which costs more in dowry. Society regards the dowry as an unavoidable aspect of marriage. Dowry, therefore, is a bigger challenge for poor families. To avoid a higher dowry, poor families marry their daughters at an early age. What the girl may say, what she may think, what she feels, and whether she attends school has no significance. Girls are powerless in their ability to influence their would-be marital status.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion presented in this paper, the recommendation first and foremost is that counseling is required for parents on the harmful aspects of early marriage.

Along with parents, society as a whole needs to be educated. Neighbors, social and religious leaders, senior citizens of society and relatives need to be engaged on the adverse impacts resulting from early marriage and the dowry system. The educational process must be continuous; a single meeting, orientation or session is not sufficient. Education must also be pervasive, given the augmentation in social norms elimination of child marriage would involve. Further girls should be provided with some control over their futures, specifically as it relates to delaying marriage. Girls can be included in school-based initiatives and in family counseling related to education on the impact of early marriage. From the participant outcomes, it appears that schoolgirls' capacity to stand firmly against child marriage could be increased through sensitization class, public speaking training and exposures.

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