

Child Marriage Evidence Profiles

2025

NEPAL



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BACKGROUND

Child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) rob girls and boys of their childhood and threaten their well-being. To respond, UNICEF and UNFPA lead the Global Programme to End Child Marriage (GP), the largest global programme to accelerate the elimination of this harmful practice. It implements programmes in 12 high-prevalence or high-burden countries including Nepal.

Robust evidence is critical to guide programming, policymaking and advocacy towards accelerated action to end child marriage. The global evidence on effective strategies to prevent child marriage has grown substantially and provides greater clarity on policy and programme directions than ever before.

This brief, produced by UNICEF Innocenti-Global Office of Research and Foresight, in collaboration with

GreeneWorks, examines the current state of evidence on child, marriage in Nepal. It highlights promising approaches, research gaps, and priorities to inform future action.

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE

Prevalence and trends in child marriage in Nepal

In 2022, about 319,500 girls (21.3 per cent) and 70,000 boys (4.6 per cent) aged 15–19 were currently married or living together in Nepal; 2.8 per cent of girls had married before age 15, and the median age at first marriage among 20–49-year-old women was 18.5.¹

A small proportion of studies on child marriage in Nepal examine prevalence and trends (20 of 74 publications 2000–2021, 27 per cent). [Scott et al. 2021](#)² and [Macquarrie and Juan 2019](#)³ both compare more than a decade of national changes in age at marriage in Nepal, India and Bangladesh, finding that child marriage for Nepalese girls have trended smoothly downward since the 1990s. For every five-year age bracket from 20–24 to 40–44, marriage before age 18 has decreased by four to six percentage points.¹

Demographic variation in child marriage

[Scott et al. 2021](#),² [Macquarrie and Juan 2019](#),³ [Guragain et al. 2017](#),⁴ and [Pandey 2017](#)⁵ all identify education, wealth, ethnic and religious disparities in national child marriage rates. Using a decomposition analysis, [Scott](#)

[et al. 2021](#) determine that between 2006 and 2016, household wealth and education explained a striking 96 per cent of the reduction in age at marriage for women aged 20–24. Similarly, [Gugarain et al. 2017](#)⁴ and [MacQuarrie and Juan 2019](#)³ both find that the bottom three wealth quintiles married at about twice the rate of the highest quintile. In contrast, [Pandey 2017](#)⁵ analyses a broader age range and finds that child marriage has the strongest associations with education level and ethnicity, but not wealth. Notably, women aged 15–49 in the 2011 DHS survey who completed secondary school were 64 per cent less likely to be former child brides, while Madhesi women and low-caste Hindu women were each twice as likely as high-caste Hindu women to be former child brides. Controlling for women’s education and ethnicity eliminated associations between wealth and urban-rural residence and child marriage, contradicting [Scott et al. 2021](#)² and suggesting that the association with ethnicity and child marriage may have been stronger for older generations.

[Guragain et al. 2017](#)⁴ flag high-prevalence hotspots and low-prevalence coldspots of currently married 10–19 year olds, for both girls and boys. In 2011, child marriage for girls was elevated in the Western Mountain (27 per cent), Mid-Western Hill (20.6 per cent), and Central Terai (22.8 per cent) areas and significantly lower in the Eastern Mountain (10.2 per cent) and Central Mountain (7.9 per cent) areas. For boys, the Western Mountain region (7.4 per cent) was the only hotspot compared to the national average of 3.7 per cent.

DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN NEPAL

Comprehensive and recent analyses of the drivers of child marriage in Nepal are [Morrow et al. 2023](#),⁶ [Bhattarai et al. 2022](#),⁷ [Leigh et al. 2020](#),⁸ [Ghimire et al. 2019](#),⁹ [Gautam 2019](#),¹⁰ [Bhandari 2019](#),¹¹ [USAID 2017](#),¹² and [Karim et al. 2016](#).¹³ Most of these studies carefully combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews or focus groups to produce nuanced analyses of why Nepalese girls marry early. Although each of these papers’ results are limited to certain districts and demographics, together they soundly implicate four cultural norms in perpetuating child marriage for girls, alongside the drivers of household poverty and elopement: male authority and guardianship over women; unmarried girls’ sexual purity; women’s expected domestic responsibilities; and dowry payments. Meanwhile, the same norm of male authority and providership also pressures boys into early marriage. Recently, the UNICEF Nepal country office published an [analysis](#) of the behavioural determinants of child marriage and adolescent



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pregnancy.¹⁴ The drivers of child marriage identified by these sources are synthesised in more detail below.

Sociocultural and gender norms and attitudes

Male authority and lack of support for girls

Because of women’s perceived vulnerability, child marriage represents the transferring of male guardianship and authority over a girl from her father to her new husband.^{6,13,15} Thus parents, and especially fathers, [override](#) their [daughters’ preferences](#) to [decide](#) who and when they [marry](#).^{6,7,12,14,16} In 1350 representative households in seven districts in the plains of Sudurpaschim and Madhesh provinces, [Bhattarai et al. 2022](#)⁷ found that parents’ positive attitudes towards child marriage in general made a child marriage in their own household 3.74 times more likely. The cultural authority of men may also enable male relatives to more effectively challenge harmful norms on behalf of their daughters than female relatives can.^{17,18}

Restriction of girls’ sexuality and agency

In large part, parents arrange early marriage to prevent or conceal premarital sex, an extremely shameful cultural transgression for adolescent girls, but not for boys.^{6,7,13,14} Indeed, communities generally shame female victims of sexual harassment or violence rather than perpetrators.^{6,7,13} To further prevent premarital sex, many conservative parents of unmarried teen girls severely constrict their access to social contact with boys, mobile phones, economic opportunities through migration, and even exposure to progressive programming.^{6,16,19}

Rising agency and self-initiated marriage

As child marriage prevalence decreases across Nepal, slowly shifting norms and greater adolescent access to mobile phones and social media are also giving rise to greater proportions of child marriages that are initiated by adolescents themselves, with or without their parents' blessing.

In some cases, the threat of arranged marriage prompts some rebellious teens to elope preemptively with chosen partners.^{12,13,18,20} Yet, because elopements also shame families, especially with perceived lower status or cross-caste partners, families may marry girls even earlier to pre-empt an [elopement](#).^{6,21} In interviews with parents and community leaders in a rural district of Madhesh, [Ghimire et al. 2019](#)²² found that the inability to control girls' mobility and communications greatly distressed these 'gatekeepers' of early marriage norms. This prisoner's dilemma game between parents and daughters can override the preference of either party for education over marriage.^{6,12}

In other cases, parents concede their reduced control over daughters' behaviour and soften their hardline stance, even as they retain final decision-making power.^{6,13,23} Parents more often consult daughters about their preferences for certain suitors and the timing of marriage, even permitting self-initiated 'love' marriages, especially in urban areas.^{6,13,22} Unfortunately, many of these self-initiated marriages still occur before girls turn 18—in a sample of UNFPA programming areas across mainly Madhesh, Lumbini, and Sudurpaschim provinces, one-third of 18–19 year old girls' marriages in Nepal were self-initiated.²⁴

Economic gender roles

The literature consistently finds that Nepalese society places household and childcare responsibilities squarely on women, regardless of their educational or employment status.^{6,22} In 16 focus group discussions, 30 in-depth interviews, and 2288 surveys with adolescents in two high-prevalence districts in the Central Terai, Madhesh district, [Morrow et al. 2023](#)⁶ find near universal agreement that girls must take responsibility for domestic work. Thus, parents prioritize sons' education over daughters, believing sons' education brings a higher return on investment.^{6,21}

Poverty, insecurity, and the sociology of dowry

School fees, larger dowry debts, forgone domestic labour, and low expectations for return on girls' education all incentivize families to choose early marriage.^{4,6,7,13,14,16,19} Because grooms may prefer younger brides for their looks and perceived purity, they charge brides' families more dowry for older brides, pressuring families to marry their daughters early.^{4,13,14,17}



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This is why economic shocks such as the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal exacerbate pre-existing drivers of child marriage.^{8,14} In a representative survey of adolescents from Sindhupalchowk and Dolakha districts, two of the hardest hit by the earthquakes, [Leigh et al. 2020](#)⁹ find that increased household poverty, families' inability to protect girls or control their sexuality in crowded displacement sites, and closures of schools may have slowed the pre-existing downward trend in child marriage by incentivizing both arranged marriage and elopement, but that afterwards the amplified humanitarian presence of the government and NGOs due to the earthquake may have prompted a shift in norms for other adolescents, both boys and girls, who began to seek long-term security through both education and educated spouses instead of through marriage.

Education

Education straddles the drivers and consequences literatures because, in theory, education protects against child marriage and child marriage curtails education. The association is clear: child marriage and school dropout are highly correlated in Nepal.^{9,16,26,27,28,29,30} [Sekine and Hodgkins 2017](#)³¹ run multivariate analysis on the 2014 Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, finding that married girls are 10 times more likely to drop out of school than unmarried girls of the same age, and that early secondary school (grades 7 and 8) are the highest risk years for child marriage, followed by later secondary school (grades 9 and 10).

Because there are no large-scale, longitudinal studies that parse out the casual sequence among child marriage, education, household income, and gender norms in Nepal, the consensus in the qualitative drivers literature attempts to fill that gap. In brief, although the relationships between these variables are complex, financial incentives created from cultural mandates drive parents to marry off rather than educate their daughters. In 60 in-depth interviews with girls in secondary school in Dhanusha, Madhesh, one of the highest prevalence

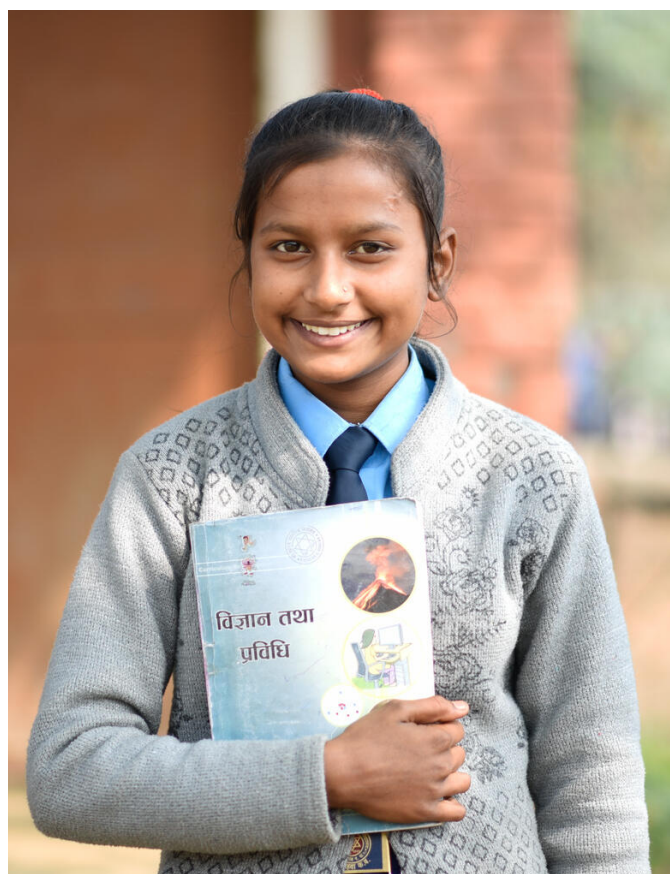
districts in Nepal, [Bhandari 2019](#)¹¹ confirms that barriers to education such as poverty and physical distance to school tip parents towards marriage over education, a repeat finding in the qualitative literature. That is, poverty and the tradition of marrying early drives school dropout, and once out of school, the cultural imperative to marry is even stronger.^{6,28,29,30}

[Yake et al. 2023](#), [Leigh et al. 2020](#), and [Rabi 2014](#) even show that child marriage curtails education for the next generation.^{8,26,27} Among 2681 representative schoolchildren from 45 earthquake-affected villages, Yake et al. 2023 found that children whose mothers were child brides were on average one-third to one-half of a year further behind in school relative to their age. In sum, while access to education is a protective factor against child marriage, learning is a casualty of it.²⁷

Demographic variation in drivers

Ethnicity, religion, and geography

Nepal is demographically complex, and although the literature on the drivers of child marriage presents a strong overall consensus, it incompletely captures the ways in which each religious or ethnic group's individual traditions influence girls' and families' social and financial incentives around child marriage. In the Central Terai, for example, [Karim et al. 2016](#)¹³ note that the Hindu practice of *gauna* implies a transfer of household goods beyond dowry that increases the costs of marriage.



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The additional cost varies by caste and does not apply to Muslim families. Some low-caste and indigenous communities, moreover, face social and economic exclusion that increases the financial incentives to choose child marriage over education.^{8,13,25} The country's intricate cultural and geographic variation in drivers is difficult to map exhaustively.

In addition, because the literature sensibly focuses on the highest prevalence districts, especially in Madhesh province, it may exaggerate the conditions driving child marriage across Nepal. For example, compared to three robust studies that provide a nuanced picture of drivers in communities surrounding CARE's Tipping Point Initiative in the Central Terai,^{6,13} studies from other regions typically identify similar drivers but greater average adolescent agency. In Koshi province, post-earthquake Bagmati province, and 18 districts across six provinces, the findings of Ghimire et al. 2019,⁹ Leigh et al. 2020,⁸ and USAID 2017,¹² respectively, align with the Tipping Point studies on restrictions on girls' sexuality and financial incentives but find greater incidence of elopement, adolescent and family preference for education, and adolescent access to mobile phones outside of Madhesh and the Central Terai.

Drivers for boys

The evidence base on the drivers of child marriage in Nepal overwhelmingly focuses on girls' marriage, featuring boys more often as sexual harassment risks or perpetrators of gender norms than victims of child marriage themselves. Indeed, Nepalese culture constrains boys far less harshly than girls, and boys are not always aware of their own contributions to girls' cultural restrictions.² Nevertheless, Nepal has [the tenth highest boys' child marriage rate](#) in the world,³³ and parents and communities do push boys into marriage especially if they are unemployed⁶ or out of school,⁴ hoping that the cultural expectation for husbands to provide will lead boys to earn.

CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN NEPAL

The 26 (35 per cent) of 74 papers from 2000–2021 that examine the consequences of child marriage in Nepal typically focus on education, on sexual, reproductive, maternal and child health (SRMCH), on intimate partner violence, or on mental health.

Sexual, reproductive, maternal and child health (SRMCH)

Child marriage and adolescent pregnancy are highly correlated in Nepal,^{34,35,36} and most studies investigating this association use the Nepal DHS or other large-scale datasets surveyed in a single year. Most precisely, Sekine et al. 2020 attempt to isolate the influence of child marriage on unintended pregnancy by comparing current or former child brides aged 15–49 in 2016 with women who married as adults but had otherwise identical demographic profiles. They conclude that child brides were 10.1 percentage points more likely to have an unintended pregnancy. In another cross-sectional DHS study, Manandhar and Joshi 2020 tie child marriage to gynaecological problems, miscarriages, and stillbirths through adolescent pregnancy.³⁰ Two large-scale studies exploiting data from a randomized control trial in the Central Terai show strong associations between adolescent pregnancy and undernutrition for both [adolescent mothers](#)³⁷ and their [babies and infants](#).³⁸ Independent of pregnancy, marriage age did not predict undernutrition, suggesting child marriage impacts SRMCH through pregnancy. Lastly, various qualitative studies across Nepal have found [heavy domestic responsibilities](#),³⁹ [unfamiliarity with](#) and [wariness of](#) skilled maternal health care,^{40,41} and [unsupportive mothers-in-law](#)⁴⁹ to be risk factors for married girls' SRMCH outcomes.



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Violence and mental health

In Nepal, married girls are at risk of depression^{30,8} and intimate partner violence (IPV).^{12,42,50,43} The two most informative studies survey the same 200 young married women aged 18–25 in Nawalparasi district, five times in six-month increments, the last wave occurring three months after COVID lockdowns began. Together, they conclude that during the first two years of marriage, rates of [physical, sexual, and psychological violence](#) each more than doubled, with a 30 per cent surge immediately after COVID lockdowns began.⁶¹ Among these same women, those who were expected to eat last in their households, a norm symbolic of women's perceived lower value, were [more likely to experience depression](#).⁴⁴ Despite providing a useful window into young married life, they do not shed light on the additional risk of violence from marriage under age 18.

PREVENTION AND RESPONSE EFFORTS IN NEPAL

Laws and policies

Marriage under 20 years of age is illegal in Nepal,^{9,45} but cultural norms typically override the law. Law enforcement is lackluster⁴⁷ and reporting is low.⁴⁷ Only 8.2 per cent of child marriages are legally registered,¹ and punishments for facilitating child marriage are light, either a month in jail or a US\$13 fine.³ Dowry is likewise illegal but transacted surreptitiously.⁸ Regmi et al. provide a [comprehensive overview](#) of the legal framework of Nepal surrounding child marriage.³

Systems-strengthening efforts

[World Vision: The It Takes Nepal to End Child Marriage campaign](#)¹

From 2017–2023, World Vision worked with the government of Nepal at all levels, including 46 municipalities across six provinces, and convened 30+ civil society organizations in a national, multisectoral effort to end child marriage. The aim was to build capacity of and engage with the media, law enforcement, interfaith leaders, mothers' groups, parent-teacher associations, and hundreds of adolescent clubs that adopted the Rupantaran curricula.

During the campaign, three of seven provinces developed strategies to reduce child marriage, as did 24 of 46 targeted municipalities. Nepal declared 14 wards to have 'Child Friendly Local Governance', and the campaign influenced 44 policies that aimed to curb child marriage at all levels. Child participants of these

sessions stopped 561 planned child marriages. Although the national age at marriage dropped during this period, the contribution of the campaign and its sub-initiatives to these improvements is unknown, though World Vision International has published an [impact report](#).

Child marriage prevention programmes

Compared to the volume of programming around child marriage in Nepal, rigorous evaluations are sparse. Most programmes employ some combination of discussion groups and life skills curricula for adolescent girls, sometimes also engaging boys, parents and community leaders. Findings for published evaluations are summarized below.

The Government of Nepal, UNFPA-UNICEF, and partners: Rupantaran

In 2014, the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme developed Rupantaran, a wide-ranging social and financial skills curriculum for adolescent girls intended to reduce child marriage.⁴⁵ Since its inception, many local and international agencies and NGOs have adopted Rupantaran throughout the country.⁴⁶ The Global Programme's Rupantaran programming reached [more than 11,000 girls in 2022 alone](#).⁴⁷ In 2020, a quasi-experimental evaluation showed Rupantaran produced improved empowerment outcomes for girls than seen in a control community. The Global Programme plans a mixed-methods randomized control trial of its Rupantaran programming for 2025.^{49,50}

CARE: The Tipping Point Initiative (TPP)³²

In 54 wards in Lumbini province from May 2019 through October 2023, CARE ran the Tipping Point Initiative,

consisting of separately facilitated discussion groups for unmarried adolescent girls aged 12–16, adolescent boys, mothers, fathers, and community leaders. Each group received a curriculum on social norms, alternatives to child marriage, SRH, and activism. Some wards received Tipping Point Programme-plus (TPP+), involving additional mobilization of girls to lead community activities on girls' mobility, menstruation, gendered division of labour, dowry, family honour, and girls' aspirations.

For girls, the evaluation found very low marriage rates across TPP, TPP+ and control sites, with no programme effects on risk of marriage. The authors note that norms around girls' age of marriage and the importance of girls' education were already changing at baseline, with baseline respondents claiming early marriage was being relegated to lower SES populations.

Restless Development and others: [Save⁵¹ the Date⁵³](#)

From 2015 to 2018, Save the Date trained 189 young high school graduates to conduct sexual and reproductive health and life skills trainings over four months in 250 schools in seven high-prevalence districts throughout Nepal, reaching 83,000 students. Among participants in a pre-post evaluation, SRH knowledge increased from 38 per cent to 78 per cent, knowledge of child marriage consequences from 74 per cent to 92 per cent, and of gender-based violence from 53 per cent to 67 per cent. Qualitative key informant interviews found that despite some community resistance, these young volunteer educators became key community resources, and many continued serving as substitute teachers, health workers, informal mentors, and impassioned activists after the programme concluded.

Violence prevention

UKAid's What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls Global Programme: [Sammanit Jeevan \(Living with Dignity\)⁵³](#)

From February to August 2017, the One Community One Family Project, funded by UKAid, provided workshops on gender-transformative norms, economic empowerment, and life skills to child brides, their husbands, and their in-laws jointly in two migrant communities in Baglung district. Young wives' monthly earnings and savings doubled by endline and their risk of IPV decreased by 10 per cent (all $p < 0.001$). Their own and their communities' gender attitudes also became more progressive, and they reported slightly 'less cruel' mothers-in-law and 'less controlling' husbands.



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Sexual, reproductive and maternal health

Save the Children: Swastha Rupantaran (Healthy Transitions)⁵⁴

Between May 2018 and September 2021 across four districts in Karnali province, Save the Children implemented a combined curriculum for adolescent girls of reproductive, maternal, and neonatal health (RMNH) (17 sessions), violence, mental health, and self-efficacy (5), and financial literacy (2). They also conducted four community dialogues per month and engaged husbands, parents and in-laws in household visits. At endline there were significant increases in girls' modern contraceptive use, RMNH knowledge perceived parental support for delaying marriage and motherhood, and progressive attitudes around violence, sexual agency, and shared responsibility for family planning. There was, however, no comparison group to show causality.

[Undie et al. 2014](#)⁵⁵ and [CREHPA 2004](#)⁵⁶ both also show that community-based SRH interventions for married girls and their families in Nepal can increase girls' SRH knowledge and contraceptive use as well as equity in marital responsibility for family planning.

PRIORITIES FOR RESEARCH AND INVESTMENT

More rigorous evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to prevent child marriage: Strengthen the evidence base by conducting high-quality studies on the effectiveness and impact of existing programmes to prevent child marriage in Nepal.

Expand research on the role of financial incentives, particularly cash transfer programmes. Given the strong link between poverty and child marriage, more evidence is needed on how cash transfer schemes may influence marriage decisions in Nepal

Develop and evaluate strategies to engage male norm-setters. Prioritize research on effective ways to involve fathers, brothers, suitors, and male community leaders in shifting harmful gender norms that drive child marriage.

Conduct multivariate analyses using the 2022 DHS data. Use the latest national survey data to unpack how wealth, education, ethnicity, religion, and geography independently and jointly influence child marriage.

Financial incentives: Despite poverty's clear influence on child marriage in Nepal, the research on cash transfer programmes in Nepal is limited.

Deepen subnational analysis of child marriage drivers, especially for self-initiated marriages. Generate more granular evidence by province, ethnicity, religion, and type of child marriage to account for Nepal's demographic complexity.

Advance research on marital violence and mental health among married girls. Move beyond correlation studies to diagnose the nature, severity, and long-term impacts of violence and mental health challenges faced by married girls.

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INSTITUTIONAL INFORMATION

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