NEPAL
CASE
STUDY

Review of Technology-Based Interventions to Address Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation

UNFPA

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DATA-POP
ALLIANCE

NEPAL

THE CONTEXT OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND FGM IN THE COUNTRY

NEPAL OVERVIEW	
Child marriage prevalence[1] (girls married before the age of 18 years, as a proportion of all girls)	33%
FGM prevalence[2]	–
Internet users[3] (proportions of the male and female populations aged 15 to 49)	61% of men 41% of women
Mobile phone ownership[4] (proportions of the male and female populations aged 15 to 49)	91% of men 79% of women
Level of government support for digital literacy[5]	–

NEWS ABOUT HARMFUL PRACTICES: WORD CLOUD MAPS AND NUMBERS OF REPORTS

FIGURE 1. GDELT word cloud. Most common words portrayed in the reports of the global media for both FGM and child marriage in Nepal (2014–2022)

EARLY MARRIAGE
EARLY AND
FORCED MARRIAGE
FORCED MARRIAGE
ARRANGED MARRIAGE
CHILD BRIDE HONOR KILLING
CHILD MARRIAGE
GIRLS NOT BRIDES
UNDERAGE MARRIAGE

Note: This word cloud map was produced with data from the Event Database of the GDELT project, which monitors the world's broadcast, print and web news in over 100 languages; identifying the people, locations, institutions, topics, publications, sentiments, numbers, quotations, pictures and occurrences linked to events worldwide. After filtering the database for a comprehensive pool of keywords related to FGM and child marriage and technology in Nepal, the most common words portrayed in the reports related to these issues are mapped in a country word cloud. The bigger the font size, the more frequently the word appears.

FIGURE 2. Number of reports covering the topic of child marriage in Nepal compared with other countries (2014–2022)
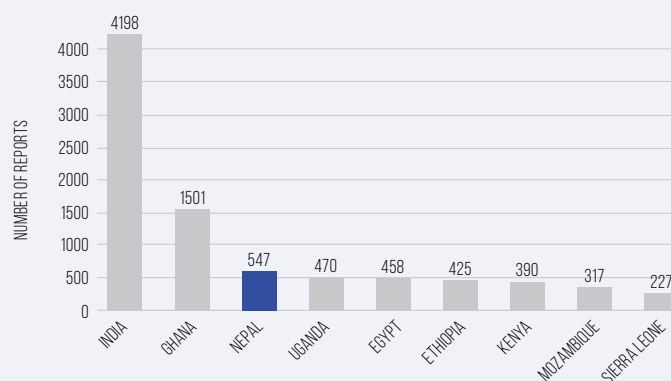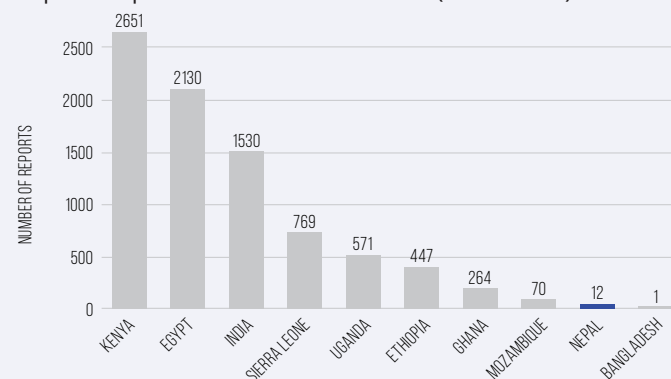

INDIA 4198, GHANA 1501, NEPAL 547, UGANDA 470, EGYPT 458, ETHIOPIA 425, KENYA 390, MOZAMBIQUE 317, SIERRA LEONE 227

FIGURE 3. Number of reports covering the topic of FGM in Nepal compared with other countries (2014–2022)

KENYA 2651, EGYPT 2130, INDIA 1530, SIERRA LEONE 769, UGANDA 571, ETHIOPIA 447, GHANA 264, MOZAMBIQUE 70, NEPAL 12, BANGLADESH 1

Note: After filtering the GDELT project database for the actors, actions, and associated reports pertaining to child marriage and/or FGM in Nepal, it can be observed that there are a total of 547 reports corresponding to child marriage and 12 reports corresponding to FGM in the country.

Nepal is home to 4.1 million child brides (girls and women who were married before 18 years of age), or 33 per cent of young women (aged 20–24) who had married in childhood.[6] Of these, 1.2 million were married before reaching the age of 15 years. Child marriage prevalence has significantly changed in recent decades. The percentage of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before age 18 decreased from 58 per cent in 1994 to 33 per cent in 2019. In the past 10 years, the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 who had their first marriage or union before 18 has decreased on average by 4.3 per cent annually. However, to end child marriage globally by 2030, as stated in SDG 5, more work must be done.[7]

As in other nations, poverty, the low societal value placed on girls, and limited access to education are among the causes of child marriage in Nepal. Contributing factors include the caste system of social class and patriarchal society. In contrast to urban regions, where 34.7 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 have married before the age of 18, child marriage is more common in rural areas, where 52.1 per cent of such women have been affected. Regarding education, married girls are 10 times less likely than their unmarried counterparts to be in school, and more than a quarter of women with no formal education were married before the age of 15 years.[8] It is also known that adolescents may choose to be married in order to avoid being pushed into an undesired arranged marriage, or to flee from other problems at home. Humanitarian crises, like the severe earthquake in 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic, depress the economic situation, which might encourage families to marry off their daughters for economic benefits.[9]

On the other hand, FGM is a much less prevalent issue in the country, and there is currently no reliable data available on the practice of FGM in Nepal.[10]

THE TECHNOLOGY ENVIRONMENT IN NEPAL

Exploring the technology context in Nepal, approximately 90.5 per cent of the population has access to electricity.[11] While the Nepal Telecommunications Authority states that 91 per cent of the country's population has access to the internet, ITU suggests the number is only 38 per cent[12] (measured by the number of individuals who have used the internet (from any location) in the last three months). The Nepal Telecommunications Authority states that in 2021, 27.76 million individuals could access the internet, mostly through their mobile devices (65.68 per cent). In the past decade, the country has seen notable improvements in the telecommunication landscape. Access to 3G mobile data is available to more than 12 million people, and access to 4G mobile data is available to more than 7 million individuals , while the number of people with a mobile cellular telephone subscription (i.e., subscriptions to a mobile telephone service) stands at 127 per 100 inhabitants.[13] Likewise, fixed broadband internet is available to 25.27 per cent of consumers.[14] Since 2015, the Government of Nepal has been working to expand internet connectivity as part of its vision of a digital society that would connect 90 per cent of the population to broadband services by 2020.[15]

Mobile phone ownership is notably high in Nepal, with an equivalent of 153.5 per cent of the total population connected as of January 2022, 4 per cent higher than the previous year. This high figure is likely to be due to many individuals holding multiple mobile connections, while little information is available on what percentage of mobile phone owners own smartphones which allow access to applications and other features.[16] Approximately 72.6 per cent of females between 15 and 49 years of age own a mobile phone.[17]

However, in comparison to males, girls aged 15 to 19 years are less likely to have used the internet and to own a mobile phone. Research indicates that rates of internet use among boys were double compared with girls in Nepal, and phone ownership was almost 30 per cent higher among boys, as well, weekly access to information media.[18]

Digital literacy is among the top priorities of the national government's Digital Nepal Framework policy launched in 2018. Digital education provided to children beginning in primary school has only recently begun (2019), however the Framework seeks to reduce and eventually eliminate the digital divide between economic classes. Gender parity in education is also included in the Framework's goals, however little attention is paid to specifically

targeting digital literacy gaps between male and female Nepalis, such as an e-inclusion strategy or STEM education encouragement. Government efforts such as the School Sector Development Programme and ICT implementation through Open Learning Exchange Nepal and OpenIDEO programmes have tried to close the gender and age gaps in education considerably.[19]

Common sources for data on these and other topics (the World Bank, the Gender Digital Divide Index, etc.) are noticeably lacking data for Nepal. Until this data collection and dissemination gap is addressed, it will be notably more difficult to confront the specific developmental needs of Nepal, including implications for women and girls.

MAPPING OF TECH INTERVENTIONS

The interventions mapped in this section stem from an initial landscape exercise conducted jointly by UNFPA and UNICEF, followed by a systematic review of publicly available data and information on technology-driven and technology-enabled interventions addressing child marriage and/or FGM in Nepal. The compiled information was curated and complemented with insights emerging from key informant interviews conducted with local stakeholders.

CODING TYPE OF INTERVENTION

[◉] Technology-driven intervention/solution (tech is a core element)
[◐] Technology-enabled intervention/solution (tech is secondary to the intervention, there are other non-tech components)

♀ FEMINIST LENSES

The seventh column of the interventions table below identifies how organizations have included feminist lenses into the design and implementation of the interventions by highlighting four key aspects:

1 Consultation with experts and/or community leaders	Consultations with gender or thematic experts and/or local leaders were conducted during the development, implementation, and/or monitoring and evaluation of the interventions.
2 Consultations with target group(s)	The interventions incorporated, at any stage, consultations with the populations targeted, especially girls and women of different ethnicities, ages, sexual orientations, classes, and other social markers.
3 Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) instruments	Monitoring and evaluation activities were carried out to measure the intervention's progress and sustainability, and/or to generate disaggregated information, gender-sensitive/responsive indicators, and/or gender analysis frameworks.
4 Women- and/or girl-led organization(s)	The intervention was designed and/or implemented, partly or completely, by a women- and/or girl-led organization(s).

Additional descriptive information about the feminist lenses and potential intersectional approach (i.e., addressing ethnicity, language, class or other aspects of the target group's identity) is provided within the table, following the general description of each intervention, which can be identified by the use of this symbol [♀]. This analysis is based on information collected during semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders and/or publicly available information.

BOJU BAJAI / 2016 – ONGOING / ◎

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPE OF TECH-NOLOGIES USED	FEMINIST LENSES
N/A	Boju Bajai	Other: gender equality (e.g., gender-based violence and social justice)	Nationwide	1. Individual level empowerment 2. Family and community engagement	• Podcast (Soundcloud) • Online videos (YouTube)	N/A[20]

Boju Bajai began as a project to address the way mainstream Nepali media was driving the discourse around gender and the politics of gender in both the country and South Asia as a whole. Through original podcasts, talk shows and series, Boju Bajai produces informative and engaging content to disrupt this status quo by highlighting the lived realities of Nepali women and starting critical conversations around women's issues. The podcast medium allows for independent voices to create a safe space to raise awareness on such topics as gender-based violence (GBV), social justice, inclusion and women's meaningful representation in an accessible format. The episodes are available on SoundCloud, YouTube, Spotify, Apple Podcasts and other social media channels such as Facebook. Boju Bajai also aims to encourage more female content creators by offering masterclasses and workshops on podcasting and content creation using feminist approaches to media and culture.[21]

RUPANTARAN / 2015 – ONGOING / ◎

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPE OF TECH-NOLOGIES USED	FEMINIST LENSES
• Department of Women and Children • Ministry of Health and Population • Ministry of Education	• UNICEF • UNFPA	Child marriage	Nationwide	1. Individual level empowerment 2. Family and community engagement	• Radio • SMS messaging • Mobile phones	1. Consultation with experts and/or community leaders 2. Consultations with target group(s) 3. Women-led organization

Rupantaran, which means 'transformation' in the Nepali language, is a comprehensive life skills package targeting 10- to 19-year-old adolescent girls and boys by informing them of their rights and empowering them to become change-makers in their local communities. The life skills package was developed by UNFPA and UNICEF in collaboration with the Government of Nepal, with the goal of imparting crucial social and financial knowledge and skills to participating adolescents. Together with strong support from the Nepali government, Rupantaran runs at different local, district and municipality levels. It aims to reach out to vulnerable youth, specifically out-of-school children and girls who are at risk of early and forced marriage, as well as other obstacles that undermine their agency and ability to reach their full potential. It is a holistic programme with the largest number of training hours (151 hours) in the country with activity-based modules focused on developing social and financial skills (e.g., how to handle money, how to open a bank account). The adolescent package runs for nine months where participants meet on the weekends for out-of-school activities, while the parental package is a seven-day programme.[22] Initially, Rupantaran sessions were in-person training to create a safe space for adolescent girls outside school structures and build their agency. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Rupantaran was converted into a radio-SMS delivery programme. The sessions have since then been delivered via local radio broadcasts in Nepali language in combination with personal follow-ups from peer leaders, either through phone or home visits. In 2020, Rupantaran had over 40,000 radio listeners and more than 5,800 adolescents enrolled in the programme.[23]

♀ This intervention integrates an intersectional feminist approach by involving gender experts, women-led organizations, and female adolescents at the district level since the earlier stages of the programme design and throughout the shift to radio-SMS delivery. Rupantaran is also led by the Nepali government's Department of Women and Children.

SAATHI SANGA MANKA KURA (SSMK) / 2001–2020 / ◎

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPE OF TECH-NOLOGIES USED	FEMINIST LENSES
• UNICEF • Radio Nepal	Digital Broadcast Initiative Equal Access	Other: sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, among others	Nationwide	1. Individual level empowerment 2. Family and community engagement	• Radio • Social media • SMS	N/A[24]

SSMK is a radio programme designed by and made for the youth in Nepal. Since its inception, SSMK has broadcasted over 900 episodes which focus on empowering, informing and inspiring young people and adolescents to take control of their own lives and make better informed decisions for their futures. It is a 45-minute radio programme that airs every Saturday and Sunday and the most listened-to radio programme by Nepali youth broadcasted in over 200 FM stations across the country, including the state-owned Radio Nepal.[25] SSMK content seeks to challenge issues and taboos that directly and indirectly affect the youth that are not addressed by their families, teachers or other media sources. It aims to equip them with life skills knowledge on issues ranging from adolescence and puberty, SRH, GBV, drug abuse and human trafficking, to other social and personal issues and concerns such as peer pressure, critical thinking, communication, education and career development. Listeners who previously sent letters to SSMK to talk about their struggles can reach them through social media channels as well, on top of the regular field visits conducted by the SSMK production team. SSMK has successfully retained its popularity with high engagement from its listeners: 91.4 per cent (7.8 million) of Nepali youth tuned in to the programme, of which 6.9 million were active listeners for more than two years and 5.4 million were regular listeners at least once a week. There were also over 1,400 self-organized listeners' clubs in almost all Nepali districts formed by the youth to hold discussions and raise awareness on the topics presented and every month SSMK received 800–1,000 letters, 200–250 emails, and 2,000–2,500 mobile text messages from its listeners.[26]

ENDNOTES

1   Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2019), as cited in UNICEF (2022a)

2   Statistical data not available

3   UN Women Nepal (2021)

4   Ibid.

5   Statistical data not available

6   UNICEF (2022a)

7   Ibid.

8   UNICEF and UNFPA (2017)

9   UNICEF (2021)

10   UNICEF (2021d)

11   World Bank (2020q)

12   Nepal Telecommunications Authority (2021)

13   World Bank (2020r)

14   RSS (2021)

15   Government of Nepal (2019)

16   GSMA (2022b)

17   Open Data Nepal (2016)

18   UNICEF (2021b)

19   Government of Nepal (2019)

20   Organization/ intervention not interviewed

21   Boju Bajai (2022)

22   Information obtained from an interview with a UNFPA Nepal representative

23   UNFPA (2020b)

24   Organization/ intervention not interviewed

25   Radio Public (2020)

26   Khanal et al. (2021)

REVIEW OF

TECHNOLOGY-BASED INTERVENTIONS

TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE AND FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION