

Ending

Child Marriage in Nepal

A decade of data and a call to action



Cover photo: Mamata Kalwar, 17, is pictured with her mother Punam Kalwar and grandmother Shanti Devi Kalwar at their home in Maharajgunj Municipality, Kapilvastu District, Lumbini Province, Nepal. While Punam and Shanti Devi were married as children and missed the opportunity to continue their schooling, they are determined that Mamata can stay in school, pursue her dreams and build an independent future.

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INTRODUCTION

Child marriage has long been one of the most significant barriers to the rights, health and opportunities of girls in Nepal. A decade ago, nearly four in ten young women had been married before their eighteenth birthday. For many girls, marriage marked the end of education, the beginning of motherhood, and a narrowing of future opportunities. Beyond its impact on individual girls, child marriage has constrained progress towards better health outcomes, gender equality, human capital development and inclusive economic growth.

New evidence from the Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (NMICS) 2024-25 shows that Nepal has made substantial progress. Over the past decade, the prevalence of child marriage among young women aged 20-24 has fallen significantly, continuing a longer-term decline that has reduced child marriage from more than half of young women in the early 1990s to 28 per cent today. The most recent data confirms that change is not only possible, it is happening. More girls are remaining in school, fewer are marrying before age 15, and the median age at marriage continues to rise.



"I was only 12 years old when I got married. My parents chose my husband and married me off. I was very young then, I barely knew what was happening."

— Shanti Devi Kalwar, 75 (Mamata's grandmother)

Yet this progress is not happening fast enough to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 5.3, which calls for the elimination of all harmful practices, including child marriage, by 2030. At the current pace, too many girls will still marry before their eighteenth birthday in the coming years. The national trend also masks a more troubling reality: progress has been uneven. Estimates of child marriage among girls from the poorest households have changed little, while larger reductions have occurred among wealthier groups. Girls from the poorest households, marginalized caste and ethnic communities, and some geographic areas therefore continue to face disproportionately high risks of child marriage.

The evidence presented in this brief points to a pivotal moment for Nepal. The country has demonstrated that child marriage can be reduced at scale. The challenge now is to ensure that progress reaches the girls who remain furthest behind. Achieving this will require renewed investment, stronger systems, targeted action for the most vulnerable communities, and sustained efforts to transform the social and economic conditions that continue to place girls at risk.

This brief examines what a decade of data tells us about child marriage in Nepal: where progress has occurred, where inequalities persist, and what must happen next to accelerate change. Most importantly, it sets out recommendations needed to put Nepal on a faster path towards ending child marriage and securing a more equitable future for every girl.



KEY MESSAGES

► **Steady Gains Against Child Marriage, Yet Nepal Remains Off Track to Meet the 2030 SDG Target**

Nepal is making important progress in reducing child marriage, but the pace of change remains insufficient to achieve the SDG target of ending the practice by 2030. The proportion of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before age 18 declined from 37 per cent in 2014 to 28 per cent in 2024-25, a reduction of nine percentage points in ten years. Child marriage before age 15 fell even more sharply, from 10 per cent to 5 per cent over the same period. Despite these gains, current trends indicate that Nepal is unlikely to eliminate child marriage by 2030. Accelerating progress will require sustained investment, stronger implementation efforts, and targeted interventions that reach the most vulnerable girls and communities.

► **The poorest girls are being left behind**

Poverty remains the strongest predictor of child marriage in Nepal. Progress over the past five years has largely bypassed girls from the poorest households, where child marriage rates have changed little, while much larger reductions have occurred among wealthier families. As a result, the gap between the richest and poorest households is widening. Even after accounting for province, caste and ethnicity, girls from the poorest households are 4.4 times as likely to marry before age 18 than girls from the richest households. Caste and ethnicity also exert an independent influence, further increasing risk for some groups of girls.

► **Ending child marriage is an investment in Nepal's future**

Ending child marriage is not only a matter of protecting girls' rights, it is also one of the smartest investments Nepal can make in its future. Girls who marry later are more likely to stay in school, complete their education, and gain the skills needed to participate productively in the workforce. Delaying marriage is also associated with better maternal and child health outcomes, as adolescent pregnancies carry higher risks for both mothers and babies.

The benefits extend beyond individual girls. Evidence from UNICEF and the World Bank shows that child marriage contributes to school dropout, lower lifetime earnings, higher fertility rates, and the intergenerational transmission of poverty¹. Conversely, ending child marriage can increase women's economic opportunities, improve household welfare, strengthen human capital, and support broader economic growth.

By investing in efforts to prevent child marriage, Nepal can help ensure that more girls are healthy, educated and empowered, while unlocking benefits for families, communities and the nation's long-term social and economic development.

¹ UNICEF Data. The Power of Education to End Child Marriage (2022) <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-and-education-data-brief/>



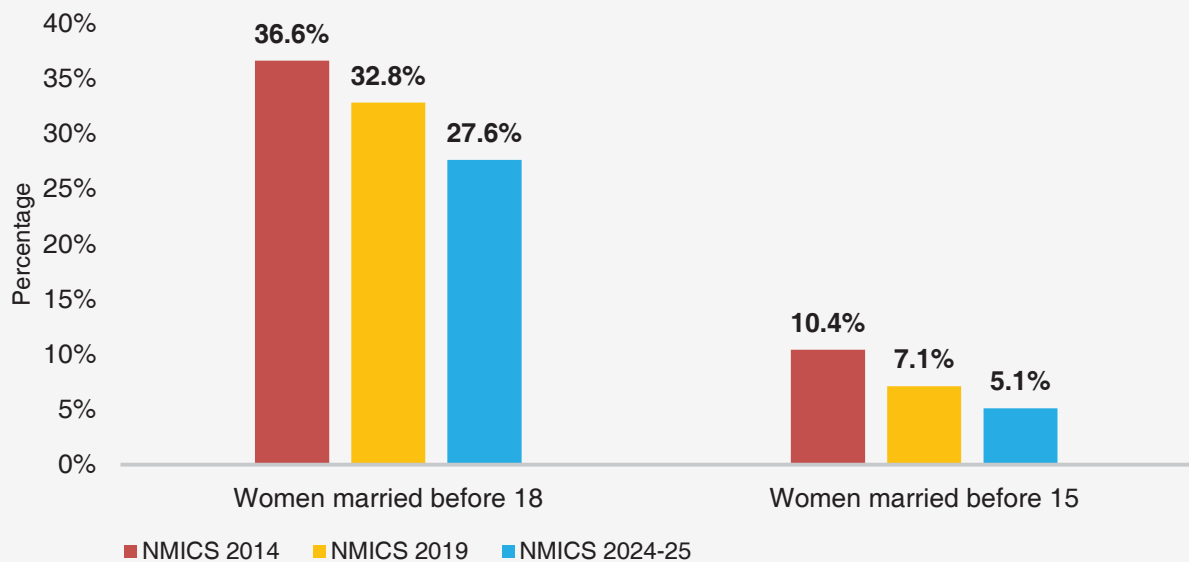
PROGRESS IS REAL AND MEASURABLE

Nepal's decline in child marriage over the past three decades is a remarkable achievement. Among women aged 20-24, the prevalence of child marriage has fallen from approximately **55 per cent in 1991 to 28 per cent in 2024-25**. The most recent decade represents one of the fastest periods of progress recorded to date. The greatest gains

have been seen among the youngest girls. Between 2014 and 2024-25, marriage before age 15 declined by approximately **50 per cent**, compared with around **25 per cent reduction** in marriage before age 18. This suggests that Nepal is making important progress in preventing the earliest and most harmful forms of child marriage.

Figure 1 Child marriage among women aged 20-24

FIVE YEARS OF PROGRESS: COMPARING NMICS 2014, 2019 AND 2024-25 DATA



Changes in survey estimates can sometimes reflect shifts in reporting rather than actual behavioural change. However, evidence from NMICS 2024-25 indicates that Nepal's decline in child marriage is genuine. Women aged 25-29 interviewed in 2024-25 belong to the same birth cohort that was aged 20-24 in the 2019 survey. When asked about their marriage histories five years apart, they reported almost identical rates of child marriage. The difference was only **0.8 percentage points** for marriage before age 18 and **0.3 percentage points** for marriage before age 15, well within the margin of sampling error.

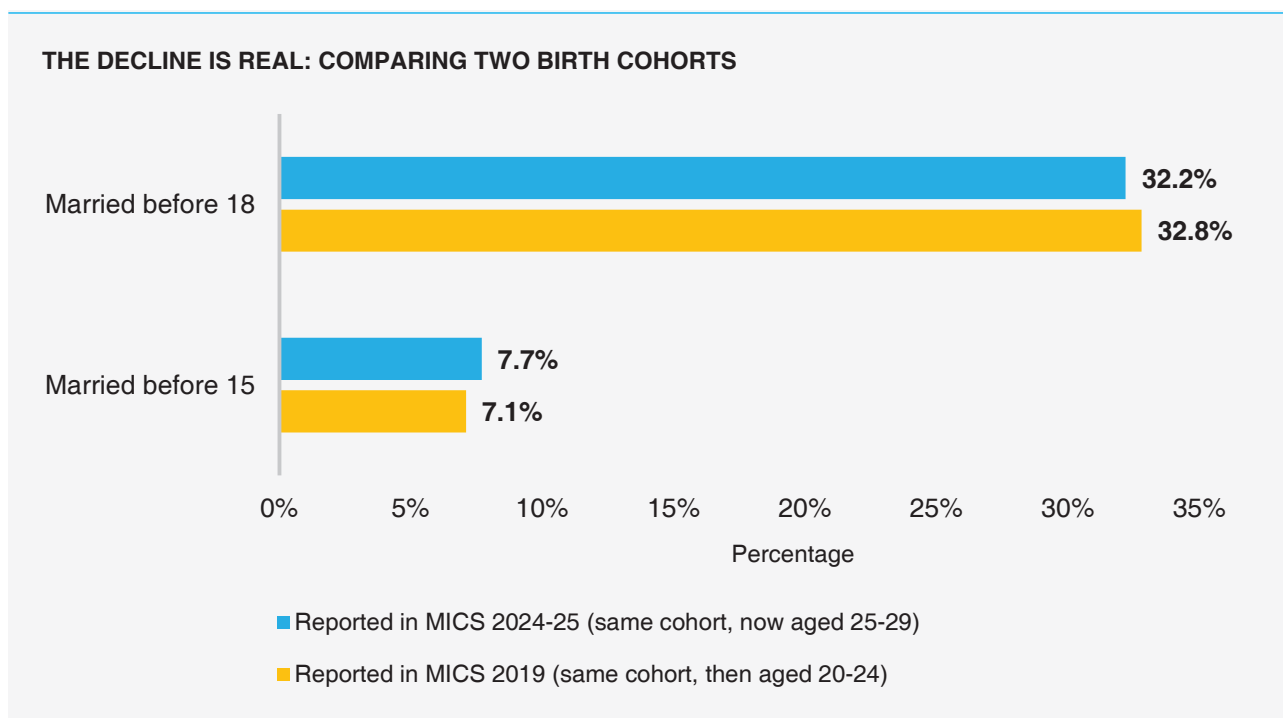
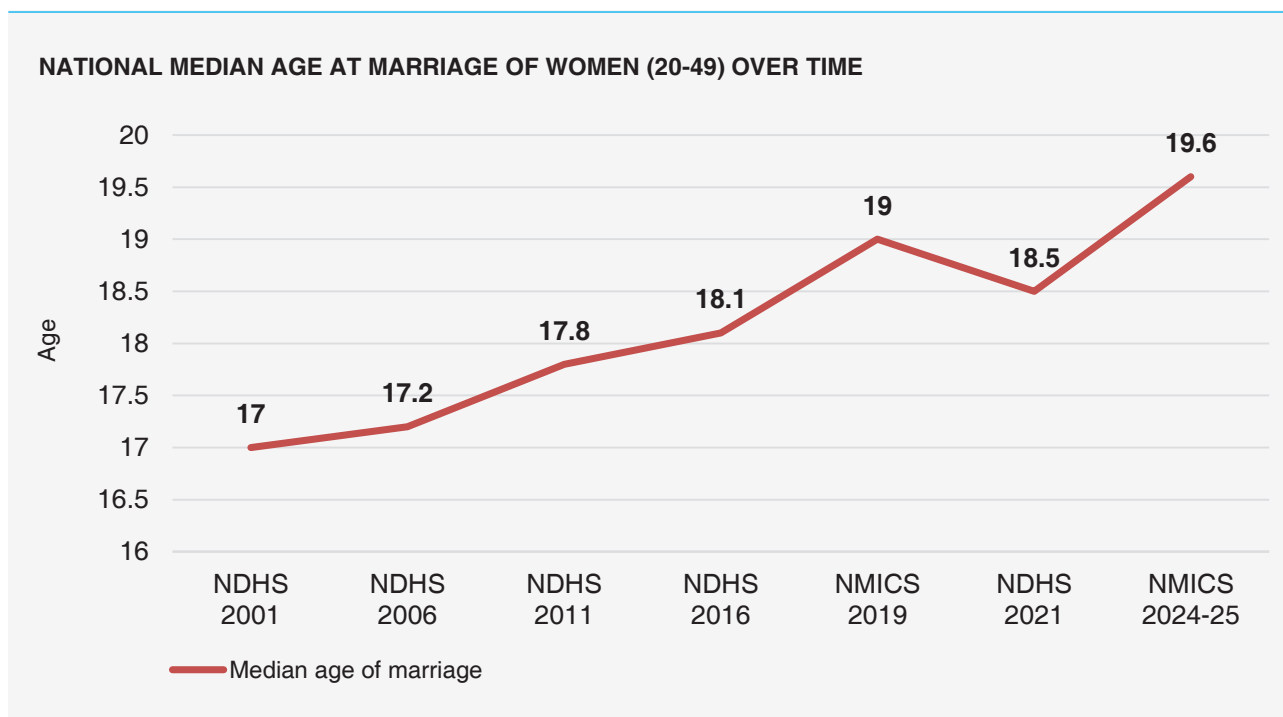
These findings provide strong confidence that the declines observed in recent years reflect real changes in girls' lives.



"At my in-laws' house, I would miss my family and cry. I'm happy my daughter can stay in school because that is something I never had the chance to do."

— Punam Kalwar, 33 (Mamata's mother)

The trend is also reflected in rising age at marriage. Across successive national surveys, the median age at first marriage increased from **17.0 years in 2001 to 19.6 years in 2024-25**. Although some variation exists between survey rounds, the long-term trend is clear: girls in Nepal are marrying later than previous generations.

Figure 2 The same birth cohort, measures in two survey rounds five years apart**Figure 3** Trend in median age at marriage among women (source: National Demographic Health Survey and National MICS data)



AN EQUITY WATCH: WHO IS BEING LEFT BEHIND?

National averages tell only part of the story.



"For a while, I dropped out of school because of financial difficulties and because the school was far away. I thought I was the only one facing these challenges, but through Rupantaran² I realised many girls face the same struggles."

— Mamata Kalwar, 17

Behind Nepal's encouraging progress lies a more complex reality. The decline in child marriage has not benefited all girls equally. Progress has been fastest among wealthier households and in some provinces, while girls facing the greatest disadvantage have experienced far slower change. This pattern suggests that much of the national decline is being driven by improvements in education, living standards and opportunities among better-off households, rather than by substantial reductions in risk among the girls most vulnerable to child marriage.

Among women aged 20-24, child marriage declined by just 1.7 percentage points among girls from the poorest households and by 1.4 percentage points among those from the second poorest quintile. In contrast, much larger improvements were recorded among wealthier households. Child marriage declined by 11.9 percentage points in the fourth wealth quintile and by 8.1 percentage points among the richest households. In other words, the greatest progress occurred among families who were already better positioned to benefit from social and economic change.

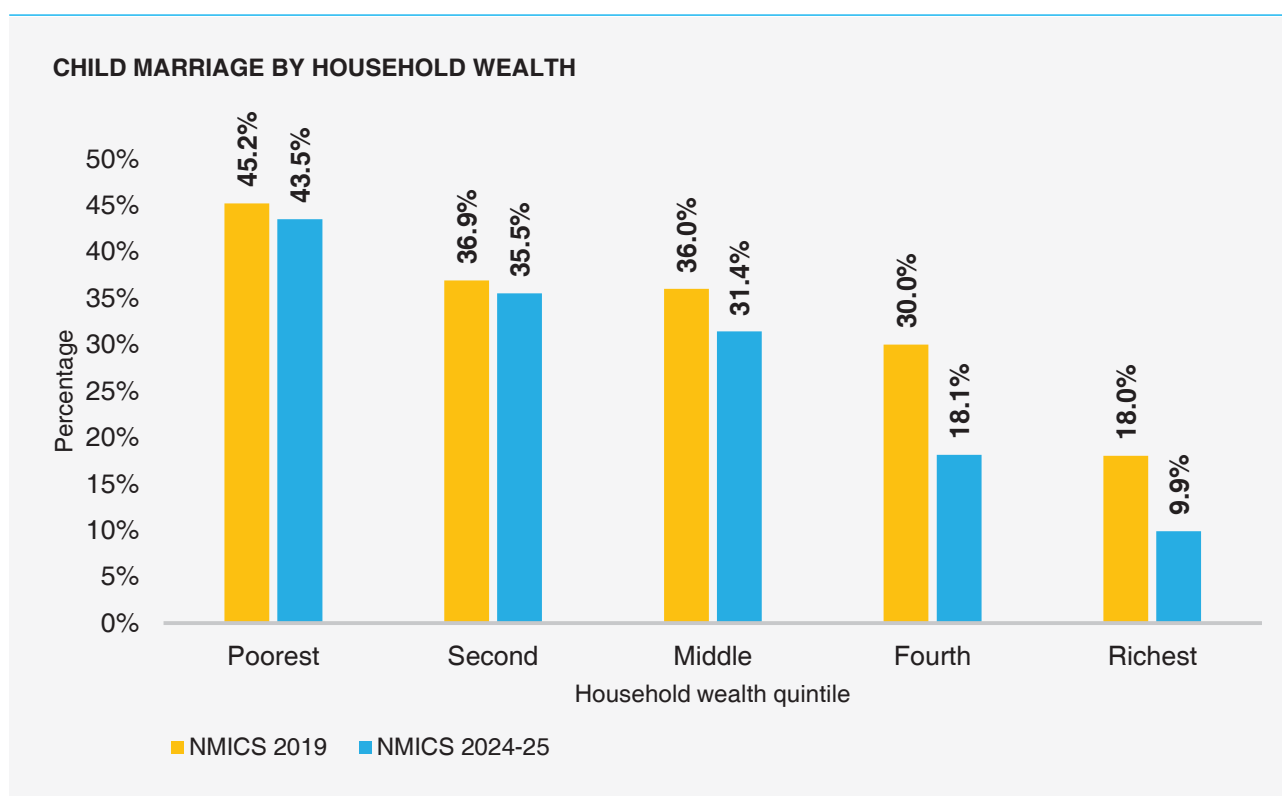
As a consequence, progress has been uneven, resulting in wider disparities. In 2019, a girl from the poorest household was approximately 2.5 times more likely to marry before age 18 than a girl from the richest household. By 2024-25, she was 4.4 times more likely to do so.

While Nepal's national story is one of progress, the equity story is one of widening disparities.

² *Rupantaran is an adolescent life-skills programme that helps girls and boys build confidence, learn about health, rights and gender equality, and make informed decisions about education, marriage and their future.

Table 1 Child marriage by household wealth quintile, women aged 20-24, NMICS 2019 and NMICS 2024-25

Wealth quintile	NMICS 2019	NMICS 2024-25	Change	Relative change
Poorest	45.2%	43.5%	–1.7 pp	–3.8%
Second	36.9%	35.5%	–1.4 pp	–3.8%
Middle	36.0%	31.4%	–4.6 pp	–12.8%
Fourth	30.0%	18.1%	–11.9 pp	–39.7%
Richest	18.0%	9.9%	–8.1 pp	–45.0%

Figure 4 Child marriage prevalence by household wealth quintile

THE GEOGRAPHY OF CHILD MARRIAGE IS CHANGING

Child marriage declined across almost every province between 2019 and 2024-25, although the pace of change varied considerably.

The largest reductions were recorded in:

- **Gandaki** (-14.2 percentage points)
- **Lumbini** (-12.1 percentage points)
- **Sudurpashchim** (-9.0 percentage points)

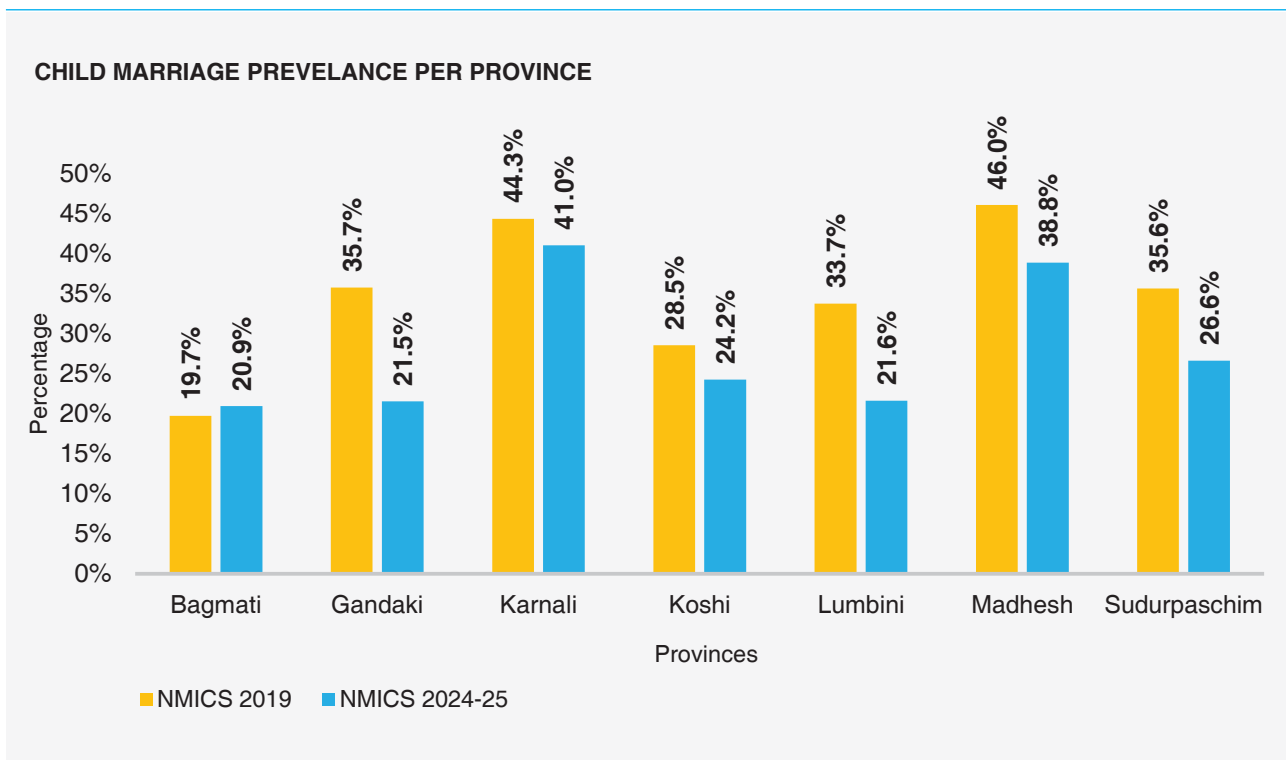
In 2019, Madhesh recorded the highest child marriage prevalence among women aged 20-24, at 46.0 per cent, followed closely by Karnali at 44.3 per cent. By 2024-25, Karnali had become the province with the highest prevalence, at 41.0 per cent, while Madhesh declined to 38.8 per cent. This shift reflects uneven progress. Child marriage fell by only 3.3 percentage points in Karnali compared

with a 7.2 percentage point decline in Madhesh. Madhesh made progress but retained significantly higher adjusted risk relative to Koshi. Although rates remain high in both provinces, the findings underscore the need for intensified efforts in areas where progress is slowing.

Bagmati was the exception. Child marriage prevalence among women aged 20-24 remained broadly unchanged, moving from 19.7 per cent to 20.9 per cent. Given the survey sample size, this difference falls within the margin of sampling error and should be interpreted as no meaningful change rather than a genuine increase. The province continues to report the lowest levels of child marriage, most likely due to higher levels of urbanization, educational attainment and economic opportunity.

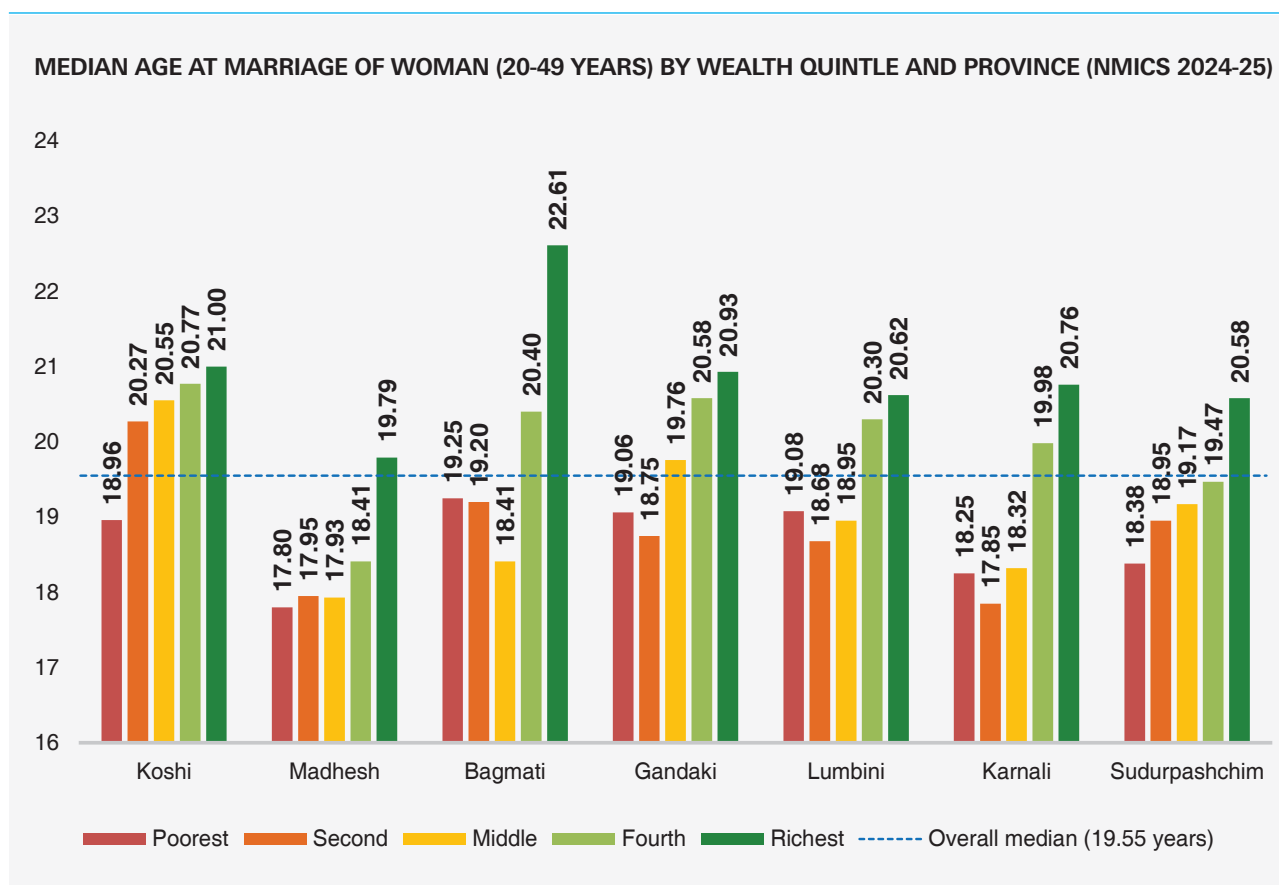
Table 2 Change in child marriage by province, women aged 20-24, MICS 2019 to MICS 2024-25

Province	2019	2024-25	Change
Koshi	28.5%	24.2%	-4.3 pp
Madhesh	46.0%	38.8%	-7.2 pp
Bagmati	19.7%	20.9%	+1.2 pp
Gandaki	35.7%	21.5%	-14.2 pp
Lumbini	33.7%	21.6%	-12.1 pp
Karnali	44.3%	41.0%	-3.3 pp
Sudurpashchim	35.6%	26.6%	-9.0 pp

Figure 5 Child marriage prevalence by province

The median age at marriage has also increased nationally, from **19.05 years in 2019 to 19.55 years in 2024-25**. However, important disparities remain. Across nearly all provinces, women from the richest households marry substantially later than women from the poorest households, with a

national gap of approximately two years between the wealth extremes. Madhesh remains a notable exception. There, age at marriage is low across wealth groups, suggesting that social norms, in addition to economic factors, continue to shape marriage practices.

Figure 6 Median age of marriage by wealth quintile and province

THE PROTECTIVE ROLE OF EDUCATION

The national decline in child marriage appears to be driven largely by improvements in girls' educational attainment. Compared with 2019, a larger share of women aged 20-24 had completed secondary education (54 per cent, up from 49 per cent), and girls who complete secondary school face a substantially lower risk of child marriage. This represents an important achievement linked to sustained investments in education and has contributed significantly to the overall reduction in child marriage.

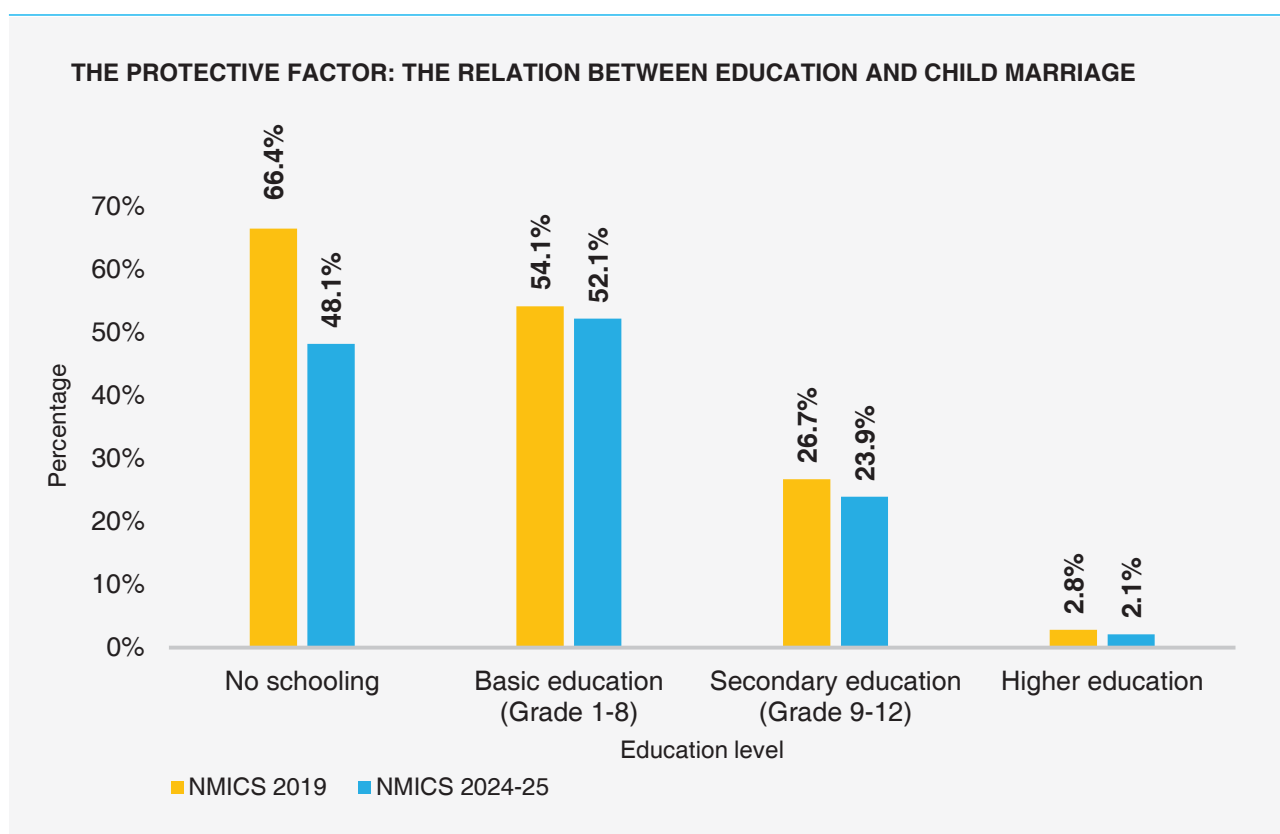
Among women aged 20-24, the child marriage rate among those with no schooling declined sharply, from 66.4 per cent in 2019 to 48.1 per cent in 2024-25. This finding should be interpreted with caution, however, as the size of the no-schooling population has also fallen substantially as more girls enroll in and complete secondary education.



"Rupantaran helped me realise I wanted to continue studying. I learned about child marriage and understood that marrying too young can affect a girl's health, education and future. Any right a boy has to go to school and study, girls have the same right too."

— Mamata Kalwar, 17

Keeping girls in school is one of the most effective ways to reduce child marriage. However, the girls at greatest risk are often those from the poorest households, who are also more likely to leave school early. Education alone, therefore, cannot eliminate child marriage.

Figure 7 Trends in education level and prevalence of child marriage

At the same time, ending child marriage helps girls stay in school, acquire skills, participate in the labour force and contribute to Nepal's economic and social development. Among women aged 20-24, only 13.6 per cent of those married before age 18 had completed Grade 12 or higher, compared with 57.4 per cent of those who married later or remained unmarried. Similarly, just 2.5 per cent of women married before age 18 were still attending

school or college, compared with 29.4 per cent of their peers.

The relationship between education and child marriage is therefore mutually reinforcing: education helps delay marriage, while delaying marriage helps girls continue their education and expand their future opportunities.



THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE ON HEALTH

Ending child marriage protects girls' rights and wellbeing while generating lasting benefits for families and communities. Girls who marry later are more likely to stay in school, delay pregnancy, and experience better health outcomes. UNICEF highlights that adolescent pregnancies carry greater risks of complications for both mothers and babies, while the World Bank has found that child marriage is associated with poorer maternal and child health,

including higher risks of under-five mortality and stunting among children³. Ending child marriage can therefore improve health, strengthen human capital, reduce poverty, and contribute to Nepal's long-term social and economic development.

³ **Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report.** Washington, DC: World Bank and International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) (2017).

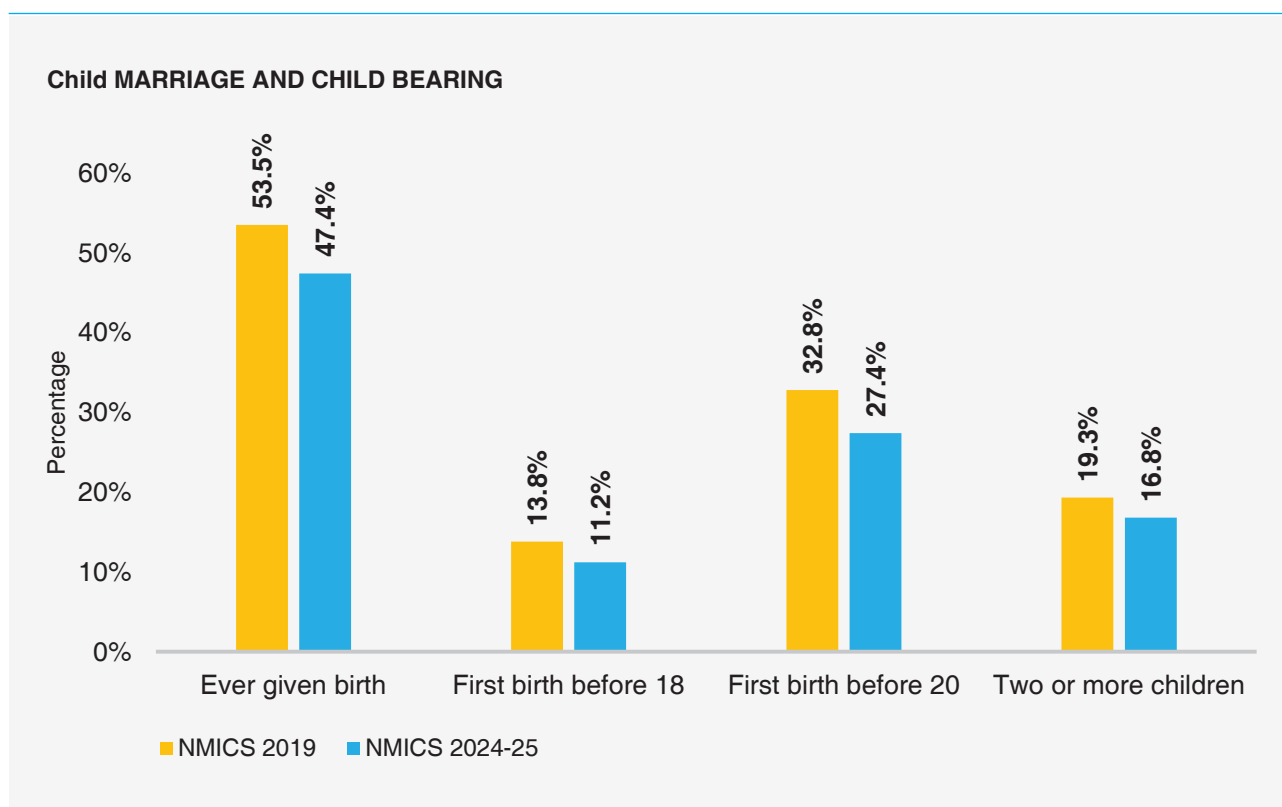
In Nepal, births outside marriage are uncommon, making marriage the principal gateway to childbearing. The NMICS 2024-25 findings illustrate this relationship clearly. By their early twenties, nearly nine in ten women who married before age 18 had already given birth, compared with only three in ten among those who married later or remained unmarried.

Child marriage is also associated with earlier and more rapid childbearing. Four in ten women who married before age 18 had their first child before reaching adulthood. By ages 20-24, more than half of women who married before age 18 had already given birth, highlighting the close link between child marriage and early, rapid childbearing.

Because very few births in Nepal occur outside marriage, delaying marriage is one of the most effective ways to reduce adolescent pregnancy and childbearing. These are not separate challenges but closely linked outcomes of the same process.

The evidence also highlights the importance of supporting young married women. One in three women who married before age 18 had already given birth by their early twenties. The challenge is therefore not only delaying first pregnancies but also ensuring healthy spacing between pregnancies. Alongside efforts to prevent child marriage, adolescent girls and young women who are already married need equitable access to family planning information, reproductive health services and support for healthy birth spacing.

Figure 8 Childbearing outcomes by marriage timing, women aged 20-24





WHO IS AT RISK TODAY, AND WHY?

The latest NMICS 2024–25 analysis shows that poverty remains the strongest factor associated with child marriage in Nepal. The relationship is clear and consistent: as household wealth increases, the likelihood of child marriage falls. Girls from the richest households have 84 per cent lower adjusted odds of marrying before age 18 than girls from the poorest households.

But poverty is not the whole story. Even after household wealth and other factors are taken into account, significant differences remain between groups. Hill Dalit girls have more than twice the adjusted odds of child marriage compared with girls in the Brahmin/Chhetri reference group. This points to the importance of addressing the social and structural factors that can compound economic disadvantage.

The analysis also shows that where a girl lives is not the only—or necessarily the main—determinant of her risk. Rural or urban residence and household size were not independently associated with child marriage after adjustment. At the provincial level, most differences were not statistically significant, although girls in Madhesh had significantly higher adjusted odds of child marriage than those in Koshi. This suggests that prevention efforts need to look beyond geography alone and address the household and social circumstances that shape girls' opportunities and choices.

Adolescence is a critical window for prevention. The risk of marriage rises sharply from age 14 onward, with almost half of all child marriages occurring from age 16 until the eighteenth birthday. This period roughly spanning the transition from Grade 8 to Grade 12—is therefore a crucial opportunity to keep girls in school, strengthen support systems and prevent marriage before adulthood.

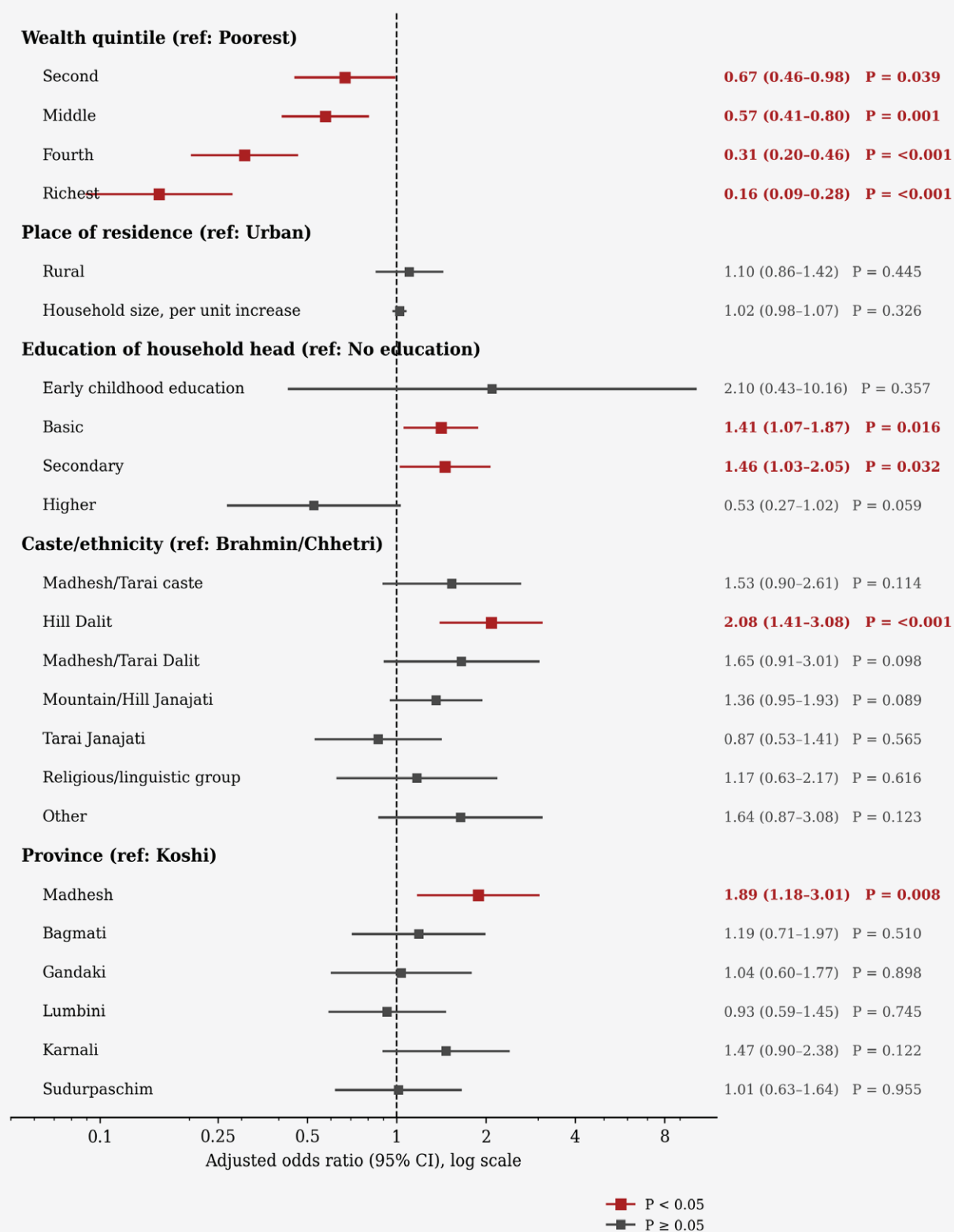
Boys must also be part of the response. Although girls are disproportionately affected, 7.7 per cent of young men were also married before age 18. Preventing child marriage therefore requires action that recognises the experiences of both girls and boys, while addressing the unequal risks faced by girls.

The evidence points to a clear conclusion:

ending child marriage requires action on poverty, but cannot stop there. Efforts must also address the social and structural inequalities that shape girls' lives, protect their access to education through adolescence, and target support during the years when the risk of marriage rises most sharply.

Investing in girls' education, strengthening household economic security, and reaching girls and families facing the greatest barriers can help create the conditions to end child marriage.



Figure 9 Factors that predict child marriage



A CALL TO ACTION: ACCELERATING PROGRESS TOWARDS 2030

Nepal stands at a critical turning point in its journey to end child marriage. The evidence from NMICS 2024-25 demonstrates that meaningful progress is possible and already underway. In just over three decades, child marriage has been reduced by nearly half, more girls are staying in school, the median age at marriage is increasing, and marriage before age 15 is becoming less common. These achievements reflect the impact of sustained investments in education, gender equality, social development and child protection.

Yet progress alone is not enough. At the current pace, Nepal will not meet its commitment under SDG Target 5.3 to eliminate child marriage by 2030. Most concerning, the girls who remain at greatest risk are increasingly concentrated among the poorest households and historically marginalized communities. The widening gap between the richest and poorest girls is a stark reminder that national averages can conceal deep inequalities. Unless these disparities are addressed, progress will continue to bypass those who need it most.

The next phase of change must therefore be more targeted, more equitable and more ambitious. Preventing child marriage requires action that extends beyond awareness raising and legal enforcement. It demands sustained investment in secondary education, social protection for vulnerable families, girls' empowerment, adolescent health services, and community-led efforts to transform the social norms that continue to drive early marriage. It also requires stronger local systems capable of identifying and supporting girls most at risk before marriage occurs.

Ending child marriage is not only about protecting girls from harm. It is about unlocking Nepal's human capital, strengthening economic growth, improving health outcomes, reducing poverty, and advancing gender equality. Every year that a girl's marriage is delayed increases her opportunities to learn, earn, stay healthy and contribute to her community and country. The benefits extend across generations.



"I never went to school because I married as a child," says Shanti Devi. Her daughter Punam shares the same regret: "Maybe I could have become something if I had studied." Today, both women are determined that Mamata's story will be different. "Let her study. Let her stand on her own feet first," says Shanti Devi.

— Three generations of the Kalwar family

Nepal has already shown that change is possible. The challenge now is to accelerate that change and ensure it reaches every girl, everywhere. With strong political leadership, sustained financing, collective action and a relentless focus on equity, Nepal can move from reducing child marriage to ending it. The decisions made over the next five years will determine whether the country achieves its promise of a future where every girl is free to learn, thrive, choose her own path, and enter adulthood on her own terms.

What the evidence suggests for targeting

1. Prioritize the poorest households. Although child marriage has declined nationally, poverty remains the single strongest predictor of risk. Accelerated progress will require interventions that effectively reach and support girls living in the poorest households.
2. Expand secondary education while reaching adolescents who are already out of school. Increased participation in secondary education has contributed to the decline in child marriage. However, education-based strategies alone cannot reach the most vulnerable girls if they have already left school. Complementary approaches are therefore needed to engage and support out-of-school adolescents.
3. Address social norms as well as economic disadvantage. Economic interventions alone are unlikely to be sufficient. Effective responses will need to combine poverty reduction measures with efforts to address discriminatory social norms, gender expectations and other barriers that shape decisions about marriage.



PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

1. Put the poorest girls first

The evidence is clear: poverty remains the strongest predictor of child marriage. National progress will not continue unless investments reach girls from the poorest households, particularly those who are out of school and living in marginalized communities. Child marriage prevention should be linked with social protection, livelihood support and economic assistance that reduces pressure on families to marry daughters early.

2. Keep girls learning through adolescence

Secondary education has been one of the strongest drivers of progress. Expanding scholarships, school retention programmes, bridge learning and flexible pathways back into education is essential, particularly during the Grade 8 to Grade 12 period when the risk of child marriage rises most sharply.

3. Strengthen prevention and protection systems

Local governments should integrate child marriage prevention into child protection systems, including early identification of girls at risk, family counselling, case management and referral pathways connecting girls with education, health, social protection and protection services.

4. Transform harmful social norms

Persistent disparities among Dalit and Madhesi girls highlight that poverty alone does not explain child marriage. Sustained community engagement with parents, adolescents, religious leaders, teachers, women's groups, boys and men is needed to shift expectations around girls' education, marriage and agency.

5. Strengthen implementation of the law while protecting girls

Enforcement of the legal minimum age of marriage remains important, but responses must prioritize girls' rights, safety and access to services. Efforts should prevent child marriages without increasing stigma or driving the practice underground.

6. Invest, measure and hold systems accountable

Ending child marriage requires sustained financing and stronger use of data. Child marriage indicators should be regularly monitored and disaggregated by wealth, caste and ethnicity, education, disability and geography to guide planning, budgeting, implementation and accountability at all levels.





PRIORITIES FOR DONORS AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

1. Scale proven approaches through government systems

Invest in interventions that have demonstrated results, including school retention, girls' empowerment, safe spaces, mentorship and economic empowerment, while strengthening national and local systems rather than creating parallel structures.

2. Reach the girls furthest behind

Direct funding towards integrated programmes that support girls from the poorest households, out-of-school adolescents, married adolescent girls and marginalized caste and ethnic groups.

3. Back long-term social norm change

Shifting attitudes and expectations takes time. Multi-year investments are needed to support community-led approaches that engage families, communities and adolescents themselves.

4. Catalyse sustainable financing

Use external resources strategically to leverage domestic investment, strengthen co-financing and support collective action among government, civil society, UN agencies and development partners.

5. Strengthen evidence and learning

Invest in data, research and evaluation to better understand what works, for whom, and how programmes can more effectively reach girls who continue to face the highest risk.



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