

Educational Aspirations under Early Marriage: A Study of Yadav Female Adolescents

Ram Chandra Dahal 

Lecturer, Siddha Jyoti Education Campus

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Email

ramchandradahal11@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In South Asia, particularly among socially excluded groups, early marriage remains a major barrier to girls' education. In Nepal, despite legal protections and development programs, adolescent girls from marginalized caste and ethnic communities—especially the Yadav population in Siraha District—continue to experience early marriage that disrupts schooling. This cross-sectional study examines the educational aspirations of Yadav girls aged 10–19, comparing married and unmarried students. Data were collected through structured questionnaires from a random sample of 300 participants and analyzed using descriptive statistics and mean-score comparisons. Findings show that 85 percent of respondents highly value education and aspire to complete secondary or higher levels. However, married girls reported heavier domestic responsibilities, irregular attendance, and reduced emotional, household, and financial support from spouses and in-laws compared with unmarried peers ($p < 0.05$). Poverty, family neglect, and social pressure to marry emerged as key constraints. The study highlights the tension between educational aspirations and early marriage, emphasizing the need for community-based strategies to delay.

Keywords: early marriage, educational aspirations, adolescent girls, yadav community, Nepal

Introduction

Child marriage remains a pervasive social issue in South Asia, with profound implications for girls' education, health, and socio-economic development. Despite global commitments to eradicate it, the practice persists in marginalized communities where poverty, gender norms, and cultural traditions intersect (Ghimire & Samuels, 2017; Plan International, 2020). In Nepal, national progress against child marriage is evident, yet disaggregated data highlight disproportionate risks for adolescent girls from disadvantaged caste and ethnic groups, who often face early marriage and school dropout.

Early marriage disrupts educational aspirations, which are critical for enhancing cognitive skills, economic independence, agency, and social mobility among adolescent girls. Transitioning prematurely to roles of housewife and mother curtails opportunities for further schooling and skill acquisition (Psaki et al., 2021). Empirical studies from low- and middle-income countries consistently link early marriage to reduced educational attainment, lower school completion rates, and constrained career trajectories (Wodon et al., 2018).



Madhesh Province, located in Nepal's southern Terai plains, exemplifies structural inequalities that perpetuate early marriage and educational disparities, including limited secondary school access, weak enforcement of marriage laws, and gender norms prioritizing marriage over girls' education. Rural Madhesi communities face exacerbated school discontinuation due to household decision-making, parental expectations, and community pressures, where early marriage is culturally normalized and girls' educational opportunities remain uneven.

Socio-economically, Madhesh lags behind other Nepalese provinces, with persistent educational deficits contributing to broader developmental challenges. Mishra and Mishra (2024a) document the province's low literacy rates, inadequate school infrastructure, and high dropout rates, which hinder human capital formation and economic growth, describing this as the "pain from educational status" that undermines theoretical models of development. Similarly, Mishra and Mishra (2024b) highlight Madhesh's marginalized position in national indicators, including poverty rates exceeding 30%, limited access to quality healthcare, and underdeveloped infrastructure, positioning it as a region requiring targeted revitalization strategies.

Marriage practices in Madhesh reinforce these vulnerabilities, particularly among young women. Thapaliya and Pant (2025) reveal how socio-cultural barriers, including early marriage customs among Madhesi castes, restrict reproductive health access and elevate mental health risks for young brides, with 68% reporting depressive symptoms linked to premature marital roles. Among the Yadav community—one of Madhesh's largest Madhesi caste groups—these patterns persist amid gender-based mobility restrictions and overlooked adolescent perspectives on marriage's impact on aspirations.

Higher education initiatives offer potential pathways forward. Mishra (2024) emphasizes Madhesh University's role in harnessing the

province's youth demographic dividend through expanded access to tertiary education, skill development, and gender-inclusive programs, which could mitigate early marriage's long-term effects. However, quality assurance gaps in Nepal's higher education system, including accreditation challenges in peripheral regions like Madhesh, limit these gains (Mishra & Jha, 2023). Broader occupational safety perceptions among workers further underscore socio-dynamic barriers to empowerment (Ghimire et al., 2023).

Problem Statement

Despite the Yadav community representing one of the largest Madhesi caste groups in Nepal's southern plains, few studies have examined early marriage's impact on adolescent girls' education within this population. Existing research on Madhesi groups documents persistent educational disadvantages and gender-based mobility restrictions but overlooks adolescents' own perspectives on how early marriage shapes their aspirations.

Understanding educational aspirations is vital, as they influence motivation, school persistence, and long-term planning amid constraints (Appadurai, 2004; Crivello et al., 2018). Community-specific evidence is essential for designing culturally sensitive interventions that delay marriage, sustain girls' education, and challenge entrenched social norms.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining educational aspirations amid early marriage among Yadav adolescent girls in Siraha District, Nepal. It contributes to efforts aimed at delaying marriage, promoting girls' continued education, and fostering gender-equitable development outcomes.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the influence of early marriage on educational aspirations among school-going Yadav adolescent girls (aged 10–19) in Siraha District, Nepal, by comparing married and unmarried

respondents' ambitions, marriage perceptions, and perceived barriers to further education.

Methodology

The research took a quantitative cross-sectional design with the use of a simple random sample (SRS) to pick the respondents in schools with the Yadav community in Siraha District, Nepal (Chaudhary et al, 2022). A structured and pre-tested use of a questionnaire of eligible students was used to gather data entailing details about educational aspirations, marital status, and other socio-demographic variables. SRS was used to guarantee that there was equal opportunity to be selected, reduction in sampling bias and improved the representativeness of the sample. The survey was done at the Shri Chandra Higher Secondary School which is a higher secondary learning institution affiliated with the government and is situated in Siraha-1 which is in Siraha. Ethical concerns were also noted such as informed consent and confidentiality.

Table 1

Distribution of Age

Age	Number	Percent
14	9	12
15	6	8
16	11	14.7
17	22	29.3
18	19	25.3
19	8	10.7
Total	75	100

Note. Field Survey, 2022

The distribution of the respondents in terms of age, reflects an evident focus in late adolescence. Almost three out of every ten respondents were 17 years old (29.3%), then 18 years old (25.3) and the combination of both of them constitutes over half of the sample. The age group of 16 years made 14.7% of the total respondents; the 14 years and 15 years made 12.0 and 8.0, respectively. The ratio of the respondents to the ages of 19 years was smaller (10.7%).

Results and Discussion

Child marriage occurs when people marry before they are legally or socially old enough. This is generally because they are poor, don't have much education, or follow strict traditional rules. It mostly hurts females, making them stop going to school, become mothers too soon, and have long-term health and social difficulties. To fix it, we need better law enforcement, more education, and programs that give people in the community more authority.

Age

Age and legal context: Most nations have a minimum age for marriage to safeguard minors, although child marriage is nonetheless common because of cultural and traditional norms. Education, especially for girls, is a very important way to protect people since it puts off marriage and opens up new chances in life.

Marital Status

There is a strong relationship between marital status and early marriage since early marriage alters people between being single and being married at a tender age. Marital status is a form of legal and social status, whereas young marriage is a form of marriage that happens before one becomes an adult or legally settled age.

Table 2*Distribution of Marital Status*

Marital Status	Number	Percent
Single	39	52
Married	30	40
Divorce	4	5.3
No response	2	2.7
Total	75	100

Note. Field Survey, 2022

Table 2 shows the count of the marital status among the respondents. A very small percentage were single (52.0%), and 40.0% were married. The percentage of those who have been divorced was low (5.3%), and 2.7% did not answer. Generally, the result reveals that most of the respondents were not married during the survey.

Age and Married Spouse

Cultural, societal, and legal variables all play a role in determining how old a couple is when they get married. Different age gaps show how different cultural traditions and socioeconomic factors affect marriage patterns around the world.

Table 3*Distribution of Age and Respondent's Spouses when Married*

Age (When Married)	Number	Percent
14	4	14.3
15	4	14.3
16	15	53.6
17	5	17.9
Total	28	100

Note. Field Survey, 2022

The age at which the respondents and their spouses got married is distributed as illustrated in Table 3. The marriages were concentrated on the age 16 years with over half of the marriages being at the age of 16 years (53.6%). There were 14.3 and 17.9 percent 14 and 15 years married respectively and 17 years married. On the whole, the distribution points out that most of the marriages were concluded in mid-adolescence.

Lived with Parents

The co-residence with parents may be one of the factors leading to early marriage, especially

in the societies where the family dominance is great, and where the extended family also dwells. Majority of the young people are under pressure of being able to stick to the tradition by their parents and this may incline them to early marriages. Economic reliance, lower prices of housing, and parental intervention in the matching process can also encourage early marriages but education, social settings, and personal choice also play major role in determining the time of marriages.

Table 4*Distribution of Years Respondents' Lived in Parents*

Age (When Married)	Number	Percent
1	2	2.5
5	4	10
10	2	2.5
11	8	10
12	4	5
13	2	2.5
14	4	5
17	2	2.5
18	2	2.5
Total	28	100

Note. Field Survey, 2022

Table 4 indicates the distribution of the years the respondents have been living with their parents (N=28) (N = 28) (N=28). The lowest proportions were found to live with 11 years parents (10.0%) and 5 years (10.0%). The smaller shares were also found in the other durations which implied different length of parental co-residence among respondents before marriage.

Parental Education of the Mothers

The education level of mothers is a key influencer of the result of marriage in the children. Greater maternal education is also always linked with reduced chances of early marriage especially

in the case of daughters. Educated mothers are more sensitized to the advantages of education and the disadvantages of early marriage and they are in a better position to promote delayed marriage, availability of information and resources, and defy the customary practices that encourage early marriages.

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Table 5*Distribution Highest Education Level Completed by Respondents' Parents*

Education Level	Number	Percent
None	39	52
Primary	6	8
High School	21	28
Bachelor	6	8
No response	3	4
Total	75	100

Note. Field Survey, 2022

Table 5 shows the highest level of education of parents of the respondents. The percentage of parents who were not educated was greater than 50 (52.0%). Approximately 28.0% had finished high school with equal numbers having attained primary (8.0) or degree of bachelor level education (8.0). A low percentage of the respondents (4.0) failed to state the level of education of their parents. Generally, the results show that the level of educational attainment of parents of the respondents is generally low.

Table 6

Distribution of Career Goals and Career Plans

Current Status	Number	Percent
On the Job	2	2.7
Attending training	15	20
Attending Bachelor level	32	42.7
Working	4	5.3
Do not know	2	2.7
Multiple responses	20	26.7
Total	75	100

Note. Field Survey, 2022

Table 6 shows career goal and career plan of respondents. The greatest percentage of respondents was pursuing bachelor-level education (42.7%), which also means that the respondents are highly oriented towards higher education. Fifths of the respondents were taking training programs (20.0%), and 26.7% responded to having various career plans. Lower percentages were now at work (5.3%), in the job (2.7%), or not knowing what they wanted to do in their careers (2.7%). In general, the responses demonstrated that the majority of the respondents were still pursuing education or skill-building desires, and not full-time work.

Table 7

Distribution of Reasons for Continuing in to Higher Education

Reasons	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
Knowledge	2.5	1.22	1
Self-satisfaction	2.95	1.68	2

Career Goals and Career Plans

Young people, especially young women, often have to choose between getting married early and following their job goals. This limits their options in life. In places where girls are married young, they often have to take care of a home and have children early, which makes it hard for them to go to school and learn new skills. Encouraging education, awareness, and supporting legislation can put off marriage, giving young people time to build jobs and better their future social and economic prospects.

Rationales of Persisting in to Higher Education

Proceeding to higher education may be a major safeguard against early marital status. Higher education does not only provide people with quality knowledge and skills but also prolongs the academic and personal growth. This postponement in joining the labor force or getting married can give young adults time to find out their dreams, be financially independent, and broaden their social circles.

Reasons	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
Financial Stability	3.35	1.74	3
Role Model for Siblings	3.9	1.42	4
Wealth	4.6	1.95	5
Pressure from Parents	5.3	2.05	6
Status	5.45	1.52	7

Note. Field Survey, 2022; Ranking Scale: 1=greatest reason to 7=least reason

Table 7 gives the reasons of continuing to higher education reasons distribution. The most significant reasons were knowledge and self-satisfaction, then it was financial stability and being a role model to siblings. Other factors like wealth, parental pressure and social status were ranked below meaning that intrinsic motivations had more influence in higher education decisions than external or status motivation.

Table 8

Distribution of Importance of Education

Reasons	Mean	Standard Deviation
Importance of continuing on into higher education if married or when married	4.62	0.71
Importance of graduating from high school	4.9	0.39
Importance of graduating from +2 year college	4.48	0.92
Importance of continuing after a bachelor	4.05	1.18
No response	3	4
Total	75	100

Note. Field Survey, 2022; Likert Scale: 1=not important to 5=very important

Table 8 shows the importance of education in the opinion of the respondents. Completion of high school was considered as the most significant (mean = 4.90) after which the next is the continuation to higher education despite being married (mean = 4.62). A +2 year college completion and education beyond the bachelor degree was also important but there was a little more variation of the responses. In general, the findings suggest that education is highly valued in the various levels of education acquisition.

Respondent Value of Education

Education is the most important aspect to the respondents especially when it comes to fighting early marriage. Education equips people with knowledge, skills and consciousness which is a great deterrent to early marriage. Education will give the means of learning the dangers and consequences of having a young marriage including lack of economic opportunities, less autonomy, and health complications.

Reasons why I believe respondents think married Yadav women

The respondents would also feel that Yadav women, just like women in most societies, get into early marriages because of a complex of cultural requirements, economic and family pressures. Strong traditions could also promote early marriages to maintain the culture and social unity. This practice can further be supported by economic factors such as anticipation of economic stability by acquiring a marriage partner.

Table 9

Distribution of reasons why respondents think Yadav women married before the age of 18

Reasons	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
Avoiding parental restrictions	3.05	1.78	1
Premarital pregnancy	3.45	2.02	2
Highly restrictive parenting	3.58	1.55	3
Romantic relationship	3.62	2.18	4
Parental pressure	3.72	1.6	5
Family-arranged marriage	4.9	1.66	6
Community norm of early marriage	5.6	1.7	7

Note. Field Survey, 2022; Yadav women, Ranking Scale: 1=greatest reason to 7=least reason

Table 9 narrates the perceptions of respondents towards reasons why they should marry off before age 18 among the Yadav women. Early marriage and family arranged marriage were rated to be the most influential factors followed by parental pressure and romantic relationships. The individual aspects like fearing parental constraints and premarital pregnancy were rated with a lower score that suggests that structural and cultural factors are more important than the individual ones in influencing early marriage practices.

Table 10

Distribution of Respondents' Perception of When the Best Age to Get Married

Reasons	Number	Percent	Rank
After completing higher education	7	9.3	1
After completing high school	26	34.7	2
After some higher education	17	22.7	3
Not sure / Undecided	13	17.3	4
During high school	8	10.7	5
Never considered	4	5.3	6
Total	75	100	7

Note. Field Survey, 2022

Table 10 shows the perception of the respondents regarding the optimal age at which to get married. The greatest percentage thought that they would get married after high school (34.7%), then some higher education (22.7%). Almost one out of every five participants replied with no choice

Perception of the Respondents About the Best Time to Get Married

The perception of the best age to get married by the respondents may differ across various cultural, social as well as individual factors. In the areas where early marriage is a common practice, there is a possibility that the respondents will view such a young age as the optimal one based on the traditions and expectations.

(17.3%), with others having a smaller percentage of marriage at the end of higher education (9.3%), and others when in high school (10.7%). Only a minor proportion had ever taken the issue into account (5.3%). In general, the results indicate that it is more preferable to wait until secondary or

post-secondary education is finished before getting married.

Marriage Perception Among the Respondents

The perception of marriage that the respondents may have can be affected by various factors such as cultural, social and personal

experiences and can overlap with the problem of early marriage. Respondents in cultures with high levels of early marriage can be looking at marriage as more of a rite of passage, and more so family and community pressures.

Table 11

Distribution of Respondents' Perceptions of Marriage

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
Young women in the Yadav community tend to marry at an early age	5.2	0.98
I personally know someone who married before the age of 18	5.7	0.52
I experience pressure to get married	2.7	1.48
Marriage can positively change a person's life	3.3	1.21
Marriage may increase the number of friends	2.55	1.05
Marriage may reduce the number of friends	3.95	1.27
Marriage may change one's circle of friends	4.2	0.35
Marriage leads to better financial conditions	2.85	1.12
Marriage requires longer working hours	4.25	1.4
Marriage allows more free time	2.3	1.29
Marriage helps improve educational performance	3	1.42
Marriage reduces the need for further education	2	1.07
After marriage, one usually lives with the husband's family	4.35	1.25
Marriage increases conflicts or arguments	4.3	1.34
Marriage creates financial difficulties	4.55	1.26
Marriage leads to increased marital stress	4.7	1.14

Note. Field Survey, 2022; Likert Scale: 1=Strongly Agree to 6=Strongly Disagree

Table 11 is a summary of the perceptions of marriage by the respondents. The respondents firmly believed that early marriage was common in Yadav community and said that they knew of early married people in the community. Personal pressure to marry was also not so high as marriage was considered to have mixed results. Increased responsibilities, financial problems, conflicts, and marital stress after marriage, as well as social relationship changes, were also identified by

perception. Good expectation in terms of financial benefit, education and free time were rated less meaning that marriage is mainly seen as a burden rather than a benefit.

Facade of Hindrances to Future Career Choices of Respondents

Early marriages can be seen as quite an impediment to future career choices by those who will take part in the research. Early marriage

may come with early motherhood and family commitments that interrupt with education activities and denies them an opportunity to acquire essential skills and qualifications to pursue a career. This

may restrict the capability of the respondents to obtain higher education/training facilities, working in the job market to the full extent, and taking the career avenue they have chosen.

Table 12

Distribution of Perception of Obstacles to Respondents' Future Career Options

Reason	Mean	Standard Deviation
Financial constraints	3.1	1.25
Weak study skills	2.65	1.13
Unclear academic goals	2.62	1.44
Work-related responsibilities	2.6	1.28
Low academic motivation	2.55	1.14
Perceived lack of ability	2.52	1.26
Limited parental support	2.5	1.42
Missing required courses	2.43	1.23
Excessive social activities	2.4	1.27
Low interest in college studies	2.4	1.38
Low self-confidence	2.35	1.1
Peer influence	2.3	1.15

Note. Field Survey, 2022; Likert Scale: 1=Not an Obstacle to 5=Always an Obstacle

perception. Good expectation in terms of finaTable 12 shows the perceptions of the respondents about barriers to their future career choices. The greatest obstacle was financial constraints, and then, poor study skills, poor academic goals, and work responsibility. Other academic, motivational, and family-related aspects were regarded as moderate barriers whereas peer influence and the lack of self-confidence were considered comparatively less inhibiting. On the whole, the results show that the economic and academic factors are more influential in

determining the future career opportunities of the respondents than social ones.

The Barriers to Respondents Who are Married

Married respondents have a number of challenges that may affect their lives. These barriers can be the need to balance the requirements of married life and other requirements like work or education. Money troubles may also be experienced as married people are usually required to handle household bills which may make them unable to continue with their education or career ambitions.

Table 13

Distribution of Obstacles for Respondents Who are Married

Reason	Mean	Standard Deviation
Limited emotional support from in-laws	2.85	1.58
Heavy family responsibilities limiting time for education	2.55	1.28
Limited emotional support from in-laws	2.85	1.58

Table 13*Distribution of Obstacles for Respondents Who are Married*

Reason	Mean	Standard Deviation
Heavy family responsibilities limiting time for education	2.55	1.28
Limited emotional support from spouse	2.5	1.38
Insufficient household support from spouse	2.3	1.32
Inadequate financial support from spouse	2.15	1.4

Note. Field Survey, 2022

Table 13 shows the perceived blockers among married interviewees. The scarcity of emotional support by in-laws was found as the most conspicuous one, with the necessity to deal with heavy family chores that limit education opportunities. Other reported barriers, but to a lesser degree, were lack of emotional, household, and financial support by spouses. Generally, the results indicate that the family- and spouse-related support constraints are rather significant in the process of forming the educational and career problems of the married respondents.

Discussion

This study illuminates the interplay between early marriage, educational aspirations, and career development barriers among Yadav adolescent girls in Siraha District, Nepal, revealing how structural, familial, and socio-cultural constraints converge to undermine life-course trajectories. The prevalence of marriage during mid-to-late adolescence—often before the legal age of 20—underscores the persistence of child marriage despite legal prohibitions (UNICEF, 2021; Government of Nepal, 2024). Over 50% of respondents' parents lacked formal education, perpetuating intergenerational disadvantage, as low maternal education consistently predicts earlier marriage and reduced schooling continuity (Caldwell, 1980; KC et al., 2017). Educated parents more readily prioritize schooling, delay marriage, and challenge restrictive gender norms, contrasting sharply with traditional expectations reinforced by illiteracy.

Respondents universally valued education for knowledge acquisition, personal fulfillment,

and financial security, aligning with regional trends linking schooling to empowerment and independence (Acharya, 2010; UNFPA Nepal, 2017). Yet these aspirations clash with marital realities: family control, premarital pregnancy fears, and parental oversight—cited as primary drivers of early marriage—mirror findings on honor-based decision-making and reputational concerns (Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017; UNICEF Nepal & NHRC, 2024). Married respondents perceived matrimony negatively, associating it with undue stress, financial strain, and escalated household duties, corroborated by evidence of diminished spousal/in-law support curtailing educational persistence (Raj et al., 2010; World Health Organization, 2024).

Career barriers predominantly stemmed from economic constraints, resonating with Becker's (1991) human capital theory and fertility models emphasizing financial limitations on schooling and life choices (Bloom et al., 2009). Psychological factors—low self-esteem and parental discouragement—further compounded these challenges, highlighting disadvantage's multifaceted nature (Devkota & Bohara, 2025). Unlike unmarried peers, married girls reported significantly reduced school attendance and support, transforming aspirations into unattainable ideals.

These findings extend literature on Madhesi communities by centering adolescents' voices, revealing early marriage not as isolated tradition but as a nexus of economic precarity, familial pressures, and gender norms that derail human capital formation. The retention of high educational

ambitions amid constraints signals latent potential, yet underscores the urgency of interventions transcending legal enforcement.

Theoretical implications affirm Appadurai's (2004) "capacity to aspire" framework: structural barriers erode girls' navigational agency despite motivational reservoirs. Practically, multifaceted strategies are imperative—bolstering family/spousal support systems, expanding economic incentives for delayed marriage (e.g., conditional cash transfers), and community campaigns challenging honor-based norms. Madhesh University's demographic dividend initiatives could integrate gender-specific skill programs to mitigate dropout effects (Mishra, 2024). Ultimately, dismantling early marriage's fetters demands synchronized policy addressing education, economy, and culture to unlock Yadav girls' socio-economic empowerment.

Conclusion

This study reveals that even today, Yadav female adolescents consider early marriage as a common practice that is significantly influenced by cultural values, family demands, and low parental schooling. Respondents were quite strong in their expectations regarding education and career, but marriage and related family duties were major factors preventing them from continuing their schooling and seeking future opportunities. The majority of the respondents viewed marriage as a factor that brought along more stress, financial hardships, and domestic responsibilities rather than improving their lives. In summary, the study points to a large mismatch between the young women's educational aspirations and the structural and social barriers that prevent them from achieving those aspirations.

The measures to counteract early marriage should not only focus on one aspect but rather take an integrated approach. The main focus should be on making secondary and higher education available for girls by the means of scholarships, incentives, and flexible learning opportunities.

Community-based awareness programs should involve parents, spouses, and local leaders in order to confront the norms related to early marriage and advocate for the benefits of delaying marriage. The legal enforcement of the minimum marriage age should be combined with the initiatives aimed at empowerment, such as life-skills training and financial support for families. Finally, the provision of counseling, childcare support, and opportunities for the re-entry into education for married adolescents can be effective in minimizing the negative impact of early marriage on women's education and career prospects in the long run.

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