Factors Associated with Early Marriage in Rural Mid-Western Nepal

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Abstract

Early (or child) marriage is a global public health issue influenced by a complex web of factors including socio-demographic conditions of the people. The present paper aims to examine factors associated with early marriageamong the people in rural communities of Nepal. A cross-sectional end-line study was carried out among 155 married respondents selected through cluster cum convenience sampling from six clusters of two rural districts of Mid-western Nepal. The mean age at first marriage was 18.4 years (SD=3.83). Two-third of them had an early marriage and the proportion of early marriage was remarkably higher among women than men (77.8% vs. 42.6%). The prevalence of early marriage was the most common among those of women, age-group of 35-44 years, illiterate and basic literate ones, nuclear and small families, and *Janajatis*. Sex and educational status of the respondents had a statistically significant association with their marital age ($p < 0.05$) and were major factors associated with early marriage but other socio-demographic factors such as age, caste/ethnicity, family type, family size and source of income were notfound directlyassociated with early marriage for the sample. Future research efforts should prioritize gender-transformative interventions to recognize and confront inequitable gender norms and actions.

Key Words - early marriage, associated factors, sex, education, rural communities

Introduction

Child marriage, though a criminal offense, has been practiced for generations in Nepal and is recognized globally as a major public health issue. Nepal has one of the highest rates of child marriages in the globe (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2016; UNICEF / UNFPA, 2017) ranked as the third-highest in South Asia (UNFPA, n. d.). The median age at first marriage among women aged 15 to 49 in Nepal is 17.9 years and 70.9% of women aged 25 to 49 are married by age 20 which is 59.2% in the age-group 20 to 24 (Ministry of Health Nepal,New ERA & ICF, 2017). There are variations in the definition of child marriage in the world (Mulenga, Mulenga, Bwalya, &Ngongola-Reinke, 2018) as the Criminal Code Act 2017 of Nepal has declared 20 years as a minimum age of marriage for both girls and boys (Bhandari, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2016) though it is 18 years in the global context (UNICEF, 2007). So, in the context of Nepal,a marriage where one or both spouses are under age 20 is regarded as early (or child) marriage.

Child marriage is a global public health concern and a violation of international human rights (Groot, Kuunyem, & Palermo, 2018; UNFPA, 2012; Workineh, Kibretb, & Degu, 2015) that

affects millions across the world but girls in the developing countries like Nepal are the most vulnerable (Plan Nepal, Save the Children, & World Vision International Nepal [WVIN], 2012). Though Nepal has ratified many international documents to ban on child marriageand has passed laws forbidding child marriage (Plan Nepal, Save the Children, & WVIN, 2012), its eradication has become a distant dream due to a complex web of factors (Human Rights Watch, 2016; UNICEF / UNFPA, 2017; Wijayati, Soemanto, &Pamungkasari, 2017) such asthe ineffective implementation of laws, low level of awareness (Plan Nepal, Save the Children, & WVIN, 2012) and weak economic condition (UNICEF / UNFPA, 2017). It has numerous consequences on the life of children especially girls resulting health complications (Birech, 2013; Delprato&Akyeampong, 2017; Grootet al., 2018; Plan Nepal, Save the Children, & WVIN, 2012), different sorts of violence (UNICEF / UNFPA, 2017), drop-out of school (Birech, 2013; Petroni, Steinhaus, Fenn, Stoebenau, &Gregowski, 2017; Plan Nepal, Save the Children, & WVIN, 2012), and so on.

The target of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to eliminate all sorts of harmful practices regarding the child, early and forced marriage by 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2017; UNICEF, 2018) can only be met through meaningful investment in implementing government policies and programs (Rumble, Peterman, Irdiana, Triyana, & Minnick, 2018) that requires rigorous scientific data on prevalence and determinants of the child, early and forced marriages in different situations and most specifically in rural settings where child, early and forced marriage issues are the most prevalent (Ahonsi et al., 2019; Mulenga et al., 2018; UNICEF / UNFPA, 2017).The prevalence of child marriage is higher in the Terai region nearer to the border of India and Mid- and Far-Western regions of Nepal (Adhikari, 2018). Though the trend of child marriage is decreasing these days in Nepal**(**Adhikari, 2018**)**as compared to the rest of the world (Bhanji&Punjani, 2014; Mulenga et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2018), it is still higher in comparison to other countries in the world (Adhikari, 2018). This reflects the need for evidence-based interventions to address the complex issue of early marriage interwoven within a complex web of influencing factors.

This study is an attempt to examine the factors associated with early marriages in the marginalized communities of rural Mid-Western in Nepal. More specifically, the present paper aims to assess the association of social and demographic factors with child and early marriage of the people in the study area. The findings from this study will be a cornerstone in designing strategies and interventions to address marriage issues and reproductive health problems in rural settings.

Methods

A cross-sectional end-line study was carried out in six rural clusters of Bardiya and Dailekh districts in the Mid-western region of Nepal that were purposively selected by Combating Early/Forced Child Marriage Project of Aawaaj (A non-government organization). Cluster cum convenience sampling was used to select 180 households representing equally from all the six clusters (Table 1). For that purpose, each of the six clusters (i.e., wards) was further classified into sub-clusters (i. e., villages) and three from each sub-cluster was selected randomly which comprised of altogether 18 sub-clusters taking part in the study. From each of those 18 sub-

clusters, 10 households were selected conveniently. Among the 180 household-representatives, 155 were married, who were utilized for the purpose of the present study to identify factors associated with early marriage. The quantitative data collected through a semi-structured interview schedule were analyzed using SPSS version 20. Sample characteristics were described by univariate analysis andbivariate analysis used Chi-square to show the association between socio-demographic characteristics and marital age of the respondents.

Table 1: *Sampling Frame*

Project Districts	Project Clusters	No of Sub-Clusters	No of Selected Sub-clusters	No of Sampled Households
Bardiya	Badhaiyatal Rural Muncipality–2	6	3	3×10 = 30
	Badhaiyatal Rural Muncipality–3	5	3	3×10 = 30
	Badhaiyatal Rural Muncipality–6	8	3	3×10 = 30
Dailekh	Narayan Municipality –4	5	3	3×10 = 30
	Narayan Municipality –5	5	3	3×10 = 30
	Narayan Municipality –10	7	3	3×10 = 30
Total		36	18	18×10 = 180

Note. No = Number

Ethical considerations

The study was carried out under the guidance and norms of Combating Early/Forced Child Marriage Project of Aawaaj, a registered non-government organization in Nepal. All necessary information about the study was provided to the respondents and local authorities.Individual privacy and confidentiality of the respondentswere assured andwritten informed consent was taken before starting the interview.

Results

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 2 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the total 155 married respondentsinterviewed in this study.Above two-thirds, (69.7%) of them were female and remaining below one-third (30.3%) were male. They were from different age-groups - 19.4% in age-group under 25 years, 23.2% in 25-34 years, 26.5% in 35-44 years, and 30.9% in 45 years and over. Their marital age ranged from seven years to 34 years and the mean age at first marriage was 18.4 years (SD=3.83). About two-thirds (67.1%) of them hadan early marriage before their age at 20.

The educational status of the respondents shows that a clear majority of them (51%) had no formal education. About one-fifth of the respondents (19.4%) were illiterate and nearly one-third of them (31.6%) were only literate. One-fifth of them (20.6%) had secondary level education and a nearly similar proportion (23.2%) of them had elementary level education but only 5.2% of them had bachelor and higher-level education. The highest proportion of them (36.8%) were *Dalits*(so-called untouchables and backward caste-group) and the next higher (29%) were *Brahmins/Chhetris* (so-called upper castes); *Janajati*(indigenous caste-group) covered 27.1% and the least of them (7.1%) were *Madhesis* and *Muslims*. Almost all of them (96.8%) were *Hindus* and just 3.2% of them were *Christians* and *Muslims*.

Nearly two-thirds(63.9%) of them were from nuclear families and 36.1% from the joint family. The highest proportion of them (36.1%) had 4 to 5 members in their families and the next higher proportion (33.6%) had 6 to 7 family members, and the least of them (7.7%) had up to three members in their families. The major sources of family income for more than two-thirds of the respondents were agriculture (38.7%) and daily wage (33.5%) but 11% and 7.1% of them had industry/business and service in government or non-government organizations respectively as their major sources of family income.

Table 2:*Socio-demographiccharacteristics of respondents*

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n = 155)	%
Sex	Female	108	69.7
	Male	47	30.3
Age	Under 25 years	30	19.4
	25 to 34 years	36	23.2
	35 to 44 years	41	26.5
	45 years and over	48	30.9
Marital Age	Under 20 years	104	67.1
	20 years and over	51	32.9
Educational Status	Illiterate	30	19.4
	Basic Literate	49	31.6
	Elementary	36	23.2
	Secondary	32	20.6
	Bachelor and above	8	5.2
Caste/Ethnicity	Brahmin/Chhetri	45	29.0
	Dalit	57	36.8
	Janajati	42	27.1
	Madhesi and Muslim	11	7.1
Religion	Hindu	150	96.8
	Non-Hindu	5	3.2
Type of Family	Nuclear	99	63.9
	Joint	56	36.1
Family Size	Up to 3 members	12	7.7
	4 to 5 members	56	36.1
	6 to 7 members	52	33.6
	8 members and above	35	22.6
Major Sources of Family Income	Agriculture	60	38.7
	Industry/Business	17	11.0
	Service	11	7.1
	Daily Wage	52	33.5
	Foreign employment	15	9.7

Association of Socio-demographic Variables to Early Marriage

Table 3: *Marital age of respondents by socio-demographic characteristics*

Variables	Categories	Marital Age				Total		*p*-value
		Under 20 years		20 years & over				
		N	%	N	%	N	%	
Sex*	Female	84	77.8	24	22.2	108	100	.000
	Male	20	42.6	27	57.4	47	100	
Age-group	Under 25 years	17	56.7	13	43.3	30	100	.164
	25 to 34 years	23	63.9	13	36.1	36	100	
	35 to 44 years	33	80.5	8	19.5	41	100	
	45 years and over	31	64.6	17	35.4	48	100	
Educational Status*	Illiterate	22	73.3	8	26.7	30	100	.000
	Basic Literate	44	89.8	5	10.2	49	100	
	Elementary	23	63.9	13	36.1	36	100	
	Secondary and higher	15	37.5	25	62.5	40	100	
Caste/Ethnicity	Brahmin/Chhetri	26	57.8	19	42.2	45	100	.207
	Dalit	37	64.9	20	35.1	57	100	
	Janajati	33	78.6	9	21.4	42	100	
	Madhesi and Muslim	8	72.7	3	27.3	11	100	
Type of Family	Nuclear	70	70.7	29	29.3	99	100	.203
	Joint	34	60.7	22	39.3	56	100	
Family Size	Up to 3 members	9	75.0	3	25.0	12	100	.284
	4 to 5 members	38	67.9	18	32.1	56	100	
	6 to 7 members	38	73.1	14	26.9	52	100	
	8 members and above	19	54.3	16	45.7	35	100	
Major Source of Family Income	Agriculture	42	70.0	18	30.0	60	100	.052
	Industry/Business	11	64.7	6	35.3	17	100	
	Service	3	27.3	8	72.7	11	100	
	Daily Wage	36	69.2	16	30.8	52	100	
	Foreign Employment	12	80.0	3	20.0	15	100	

Note. N = Number; *Significant at Chi-square $p< 0.05$

The bivariate analysis using Chi-square at 95% CI examinedthe association betweensocio-demographic variables and marital age (Table 3). The sex and educational status of the respondents were significantly associated with their marital age ($p< 0.05$) but age, caste/ethnicity, family type, family size, and a major source of family income were found not associated with their marital age ($p> 0.05$). It also revealed that early marriage tendency among females was nearly two-timed higher than males (77.8% vs. 42.6%). Four out of every five respondents (i.e., 80.5%), who were currently aged 35 to 44 years, were found married earlier before their age at 20. However, age-wise data on early marriage shows a decreasing trend these daysas the least of the respondents at age-group under 25 years (56.7%) was found married earlier though the association between age and marital age was not statistically significant ($p = .164$). Most of the respondents (89.8%) with basic literate levels were found married earlier and the trend of early marriage decreased with an increase in levels of education from elementary (63.9%) to secondary and higher education (37.5%). But,

interestingly, the proportion of early marriage was lower among illiterate respondents (73.3%) than basic literate ones.

Early marriage was the most common among *Janjati*and *Madhesi*/Muslim (78.6% and 72.7% respectively) than *Dalit*and *Brahmin*/*Chhetri* (64.9% and 57.8% respectively) but Chi-square test could not show an association between caste/ethnicity and marital age. The respondents from nuclear families were found married earlier than joint families (70.7% vs. 60.7%) which was not statistically significant. Similarly, the respondents from smaller family sizes had a higher proportion of early marriages than larger families as 75% of the respondents from the families with a maximum of three members had early marriage in comparison to 54.3% in families with eight or more members. But respondents with 4 to 5 and 6 to 7 members in their families had similar proportions of early marriages which were 67.9% and 73.1% respectively. Four out of every five respondents with foreign employment as the major source of family income had an early marriage and the least proportion (27.3%) of the respondents who had served as the major source of family income were married earlier. Similar proportions of early marriages (70% and 69.2% respectively) were seen among the respondents who had agriculture and daily wage as major sources of family income.

Discussion

The socio-demographic factors of the respondents like sex and education were found as major factors associated with early marriage. The prevalence of early marriage in the study area was 67.1% and it was 56.7% among the respondents currently aged less than25 years which is higher than a nationallyrepresentative study of46.2% in the 20-24 years age-group in Nepal (Plan Nepal, Save the Children, & WVIN, 2012).The higher proportion of early married women in comparison to men (77.8% vs. 42.6%) and statistically significant association between sex of the respondents and their marital age ($p < 0.05$) showed the influencing role of sex in determining early marriage which corresponds with the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS)results that proportion of early marriage among women is higher than men (71% vs. 38%) in age-group 25-49 years (Ministry of Health Nepal, New ERA & ICF, 2017). It shows that deep-rooted gender norms in Nepalese society that prefer girls to marry a few years earlier than boyshas a significant role to cause early marriage among girls than boys. The age-wise data of the respondents showed a decreasing trend of early marriage in the study area though it was highest (80.5%) in the age-group 35-44 years but the Chi-square results did not show an association of respondents' current age with their marital age. The NDHS data also demonstrated similar resultsof increasing early marriage with an increase in the current ages of respondents that means the trend is decreasing (Ministry of Health Nepal, New ERA & ICF, 2017).

The educational status of the respondents is seen oppositely relatedto early marriage which decreases while increasing levels of education of the respondents as early marriage proportion was 73.3% for illiterate and 37.5% for the secondary and higher level. This association between the educational status of the respondents and their marital age was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) that was also supported by the NDHS data which revealed the association of education level with a median age at marriage among both women and men as women and men with SLC

or higher education married about 4 to 5 years later than those with no education (Ministry of Health Nepal, New ERA,& ICF, 2017). Similarly, a nationally representative study in Nepal indicated that child marriage was the most prevalent among illiterate women and menas represented by 51.2% and 21.5% respectively (Plan Nepal, Save the Children, & WVIN, 2012) and another study in Nepal showed the significant association between education and early marriage (Sah et al., 2014). Furthermore, studies in Zambia, Bangladeshand Indonesia reflected that low level of education was significantly associated with early marriage and education was identified as a significant predictor of determining marital age (Mulengaet al., 2018; Razu, 2018; Rumble et al., 2018).

There was an increment of 6-7% in the proportions of early marriages in every caste and ethnic groups from *Brahmin/Chhetri*, *Dalit* and *Madhesi/Muslim* to*Janajati* that reflected a slight influence of caste/ethnicity in determining marital age but this association was not statistically significant (p = .207). However, a wider gap of more than 20% in the proportion of early marriage between *Brahmin/Chhetri* and *Janajati* shows a vital role of caste/ethnicity in determining early marriage that is statistically significant too (p = .038). A nationally representative study in Nepal indicated that child marriage was the most prevalent among Terai Dalits, Hill Dalits and Muslims which were 87.1%, 64.5% and 62.2% respectively (Plan Nepal, Save the Children, & WVIN, 2012). Similarly, another study in Nepal had similar results that Dalits and Terai castes had a higher prevalence of early marriage than other ethnic groups but the difference was not significant (Sahet al., 2014). But the present study found*Janajati* children as the most vulnerable to early marriage. However, *Madhesi/Muslim* and *Dalit* children in the present study were also in the greater risk of early marriage in comparison to *Brahmin* and *Chhetri* children. So, the analysis makes some meaning that caste/ethnicity can be a minor contributing factor to early marriage.

The proportion of early marriages was higher in nuclear families than in joint families by 10% but the study could not show a statistically significant association between the type of family and marital age of the respondents. Early marriage was prevalent mostly in the smallest family with maximum three members which were the least in the largest family with eight members or over but the family size of the respondents was not significantly associated with early marriages that differs from other studies which demonstrated a positive association of family size with child marriage (Ali, Ibrahim, Abdelgbar, Elgessim, 2014; Mulengaet al., 2018). But a few studies in Indonesia demonstrated that pressure to marry earlier was more in smaller families than in larger families with a greater number of siblings (Rumble et al., 2018) and family size did not influencethe marital age of women (Hardiani&Junaidi, 2018). The major source of respondents' family income could not show association with early marriage though the respondents with foreign employment, agriculture and daily wage as major income sourceshad a higher prevalence of early marriage than service and industry/business. A study indicated that family economic factors were responsible to cause most of the early marriages (Birech, 2013; Wijayatiet al., 2017); high family income reduced the incidence of early marriage which was statistically associatedtoo (Agtikasari, Soemanto, & Murti, 2019; Wijayatiet al., 2017). But the present study did not cover the income variables of the sample.

Limitations. Although the findings of this study offer valuable insights into factors associated with early marriage among the people of rural communities in Nepal, they need to be interpreted in the light of a few limitations of the study. As the study was based on the endline survey, its findings may not be generalizable in other general contexts. Furthermore,it cannot guarantee equal representation of all the household samples due to the unavailability of the latest data on the survey universe but tried to cover all the study clusters through equal representation of sub-clusters from all these clusters.

Conclusion

Early (or child) marriage is a global public health concernthat is influenced by a complex web of factors. The prevalence of early marriage was the most common among those of women, age-group of 35-44 years, illiterate and basic literate ones, nuclear and small families, and *Janajatis*. Socio-demographic factors like age, caste/ethnicity, family type, family size and source of income were not found directly associated with early marriage for the sample but Sex and educational status were significantly associated with early marriage. Combating early marriage requires addressing these factors with sound educational provision to all children, especially to the girl child. Child marriage needs to be understood within the highly gendered context of Nepalese society and future research efforts should prioritize gender-transformative interventions to recognize and confront inequitable gender norms and actions.

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