Prevalence of Early Marriage among the Mushar (Musahar) Community of Nepal — A Review

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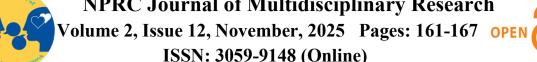https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7885-1427

Abstract

Background: Child marriage is a persistent public health and human rights issue in Nepal, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. The Musahar (Mushar), a Dalit group in the Terai region, experience extreme socioeconomic deprivation and social exclusion, which are known drivers of early marriage. However, national health surveys often lack the disaggregated data needed to understand the specific burden within this vulnerable population.

Objective: This review aimed to synthesize existing evidence on early marriage in Nepal, with a specific focus on compiling Musahar-specific prevalence, drivers, and consequences, and to identify critical research gaps to inform future targeted interventions.

Methods: A narrative review was conducted, synthesizing evidence from international and national agency reports (e.g., UNICEF, UNFPA), peer-reviewed literature from databases including NepJOL, NGO project reports, and recent media/advocacy documents. The search strategy prioritized finding both quantitative and qualitative sources to triangulate evidence on the Musahar community.

Findings: National data indicate that 33-40% of Nepali women aged 20-24 were married before 18, with higher rates in the Terai. While direct, representative data for the Musahar are absent, consistent qualitative and programmatic evidence reveals an alarmingly high prevalence, with accounts of marriages occurring as young as 10-11 years. Key drivers include extreme poverty, debt, severe gender disparities in education, caste-based exclusion, and restrictive social norms. Consequences are severe, encompassing school dropout, early pregnancy, poor health outcomes, and intergenerational poverty.

Conclusion: Early marriage is a pervasive and severe issue within the Musahar community, intensified by their profound marginalization. A significant evidence gap exists due to the lack

of representative, caste-disaggregated quantitative data on marriage prevalence and a paucity of rigorously evaluated interventions tailored to this group.

Implication: There is an urgent need for future research to generate robust, representative estimates of early marriage prevalence among Musahar girls and to identify community-specific drivers through mixed-methods studies. This evidence is crucial for policymakers and program implementers to design effective, equitable, and targeted interventions to prevent child marriage and ensure Nepal's most marginalized are not left behind.

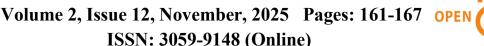**Keywords:** Musahar, child marriage, Nepal, Dalit, health equity

Introduction

Child marriage — commonly defined as marriage before the age of 18 — remains a persistent problem across South Asia, including Nepal, despite legal prohibitions and sustained programming (Subramanee et al., 2022). Recent national and multilateral syntheses highlight that a substantial proportion of young Nepali women are married before 18, with uneven progress across provinces and social groups. National analyses and program documents using Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data have repeatedly shown that poverty, lower female education, and residence in certain regions (notably parts of the Terai/Madhesh) are strongly associated with higher rates of child marriage (Tiwari, 2019).

Multiple recent qualitative national studies reaffirm these drivers and emphasise behavioural and structural determinants: economic insecurity, social norms favouring early unions, fear of premarital relationships and "protecting" family honor, and limited educational and livelihood opportunities drive the practice in marginalised communities. UNICEF-led qualitative work in Nepal finds that child marriage is multi-causal and especially entrenched among marginalized groups where social exclusion and poverty intersect.

Within Nepal's complex social structure, the Musahar (often spelled Musahar or Mushar) are a highly marginalized Terai/Dalit sub-community concentrated in districts such as Siraha, Saptari, Dhanusha, Mahottari and other Terai areas (Rana, 2017). Census and ethnographic accounts describe the Musahar as landless or near-landless labourers with very low literacy — especially among women — and extreme socioeconomic deprivation. Their marginalisation is visible in very low school attendance, poor access to health services and economic vulnerability (Giri, 2024).

Evidence emerging from NGO reports, ethnographic research and local participatory studies indicates that early marriage is a common and harmful strategy used within Musahar communities to cope with poverty, debt, and insecurity. Several NGO impact and ethnography reports (Street Child, Girls' Education Challenge, local media) document frequent early marriages in Musahar settlements, including alarming anecdotal reports of marriages of girls aged 10–11 and widespread dropping out of school among Musahar girls. These accounts emphasise that early marriage among Musahars is both a cause and consequence of extreme marginalization (NHRC, 2024).

However, despite these descriptive and programmatic accounts, there is a striking absence of rigorously representative, caste/ethnicity-disaggregated prevalence estimates for child marriage specific to the Musahar group in peer-reviewed literature or national survey reports. Most national surveys report prevalence by broad categories (urban/rural, province, wealth quintile, broad caste/ethnic groups) but aggregation masks heterogeneity within Madheshi Dalit subgroups such as Musahars (Pandey, 2024). This observation—scarce disaggregated quantitative data despite strong qualitative and programmatic indications—creates a clear evidence gap that hampers targeted policy and program design.

Research gap (Nepalese context)

1. **Lack of caste/ethnicity-disaggregated quantitative prevalence data.** National surveys (DHS/MICS) provide province- and broad caste group indicators but rarely present stable estimates for small, hard-to-sample groups such as Musahars; consequently, the true prevalence and age-pattern of marriage among Musahars remain uncertain.

2. **Overreliance on qualitative and NGO reports.** Existing Musahar-specific information is largely programmatic, qualitative, or ethnographic (valuable for depth) but not population-representative; prevalence figures cited in media/NGO reports are often anecdotal or derived from small samples.

3. **Insufficient analysis of drivers that are specific to Musahar social structure.** While national drivers of child marriage are known, how Musahar-specific factors (e.g., entrenched landlessness, caste-based exclusion, gendered illiteracy rates, debt bondage practices) interact to produce early marriage patterns is under-analysed in formal research.

4. **Limited evaluation of interventions tailored to Musahars.** Although NGOs have implemented programs (education, livelihoods, rights awareness) and reported impacts, there is scarce published rigorous evaluation evidence (quantitative or mixed-methods) showing which interventions effectively delay marriage among Musahar girls.

Research objective implied by the gap: generate robust, representative estimates of the prevalence and age-at-marriage distribution among Musahar women and girls in selected Terai districts, and analyse Musahar-specific socioeconomic and normative drivers so interventions can be precisely targeted.

Methods (search strategy for this review)

This review synthesises evidence from: (a) international and national agency reports (UNICEF, UNFPA, Breakthrough Action), (b) peer-reviewed articles and NepJOL (Nepal journals) that include Musahar or Terai/Dalit analyses, (c) NGO and program reports with Musahar-specific ethnographies (Street Child, Girls' Education Challenge), and (d) recent media and advocacy pieces that document community experiences. Searches were performed in academic databases, NepJOL, organizational websites and grey literature sources (NGO reports and program evaluations). Because caste-disaggregated prevalence is scarce, both quantitative national sources and qualitative/community reports were included to triangulate the evidence. (Key documents used in this review are provided in References.)

Findings

National prevalence and regional patterns (context for Musahars)

Nationally, multiple recent syntheses and program reports indicate that child marriage in Nepal remains common, although declining in some provinces. Reports using DHS and MICS data place the percentage of women aged 20–24 married before 18 in the range of roughly 33–40% in recent years, with higher concentrations in the Terai/Madhesh Province. UNICEF and allied agencies highlight that while national averages have improved slightly, reductions in Madhesh Province and among the poorest rural populations have been slower.

What is known about Musahar-specific prevalence

Direct, statistically representative prevalence estimates for Musahar girls are not available in peer-reviewed literature or in standard public summaries of DHS/MICS data. Nevertheless, multiple local studies and NGO reports document that Musahar communities experience markedly higher rates of early marriage compared with national averages. Ethnographic studies in Dhanusha and program reports across Musahar settlements note very early ages of marriage (sometimes below 13), extremely low female literacy, and near-universal school dropout among girls by early adolescence — all consistent with elevated child-marriage prevalence. For example, a case study of Musahar households in Dhanusha (n≈400 households) describes entrenched poverty, early entry into marriage and limited schooling for girls. NGO impact reports (Street Child) and participatory ethnographic reports for Musahar communities also describe practices of very early marriage as a survival strategy.

Drivers of early marriage among Musahars

Across sources, the following interrelated drivers recur:

- **Extreme poverty and debt:** marriages are used to reduce household burden or settle debts.
- **Severe educational exclusion of girls:** Musahar female literacy and school attendance are alarmingly low, increasing vulnerability to early marriage.
- **Caste-based social exclusion:** Musahars' marginal status reduces access to social protection and services, reinforcing early marriage as a coping mechanism.
- **Norms and local marriage markets:** community expectations, bride price/arrangements and gender norms shape early marriage decisions. Program reports highlight local normative pressures and limited power of girls to refuse.

Consequences observed in Musahar communities

Early marriage among Musahar girls is associated with school dropout, early pregnancy, poorer maternal and child health outcomes, and perpetuation of poverty and gender inequality. Qualitative accounts also record psychosocial harms, domestic violence and legal/documentation obstacles for child brides. These outcomes mirror national-level evidence while being intensified by Musahars' marginalisation.

Programmatic responses and evidence of effectiveness

Several NGOs and donor initiatives have targeted Musahar communities with multi-pronged interventions (education support, livelihoods, rights awareness, debt relief). Impact reports

show promising case-level improvements (increased school participation, economic activities, community mobilization), but published rigorous evaluations (randomised or well-powered quasi-experimental designs) that measure reductions in child marriage among Musahars are limited in the public domain. This constrains clear conclusions about what works specifically for Musahar populations.

Discussion

Synthesis

Taken together, the national and local evidence paints a consistent picture: child marriage remains common in Nepal and is especially persistent among the poorest and most socially excluded groups; Musahar communities — among the most deprived Terai Dalit groups — are heavily burdened by early marriage. However, the nature of the existing evidence is heterogeneous: robust national survey data exist for overall prevalence and regional patterns, while Musahar-specific information is mostly qualitative, programmatic, and ethnographic. This uneven evidence base limits precision in estimating prevalence and in designing sharply targeted interventions.

Why the Musahar evidence gap matters

Without representative, caste-disaggregated prevalence and risk-factor data for Musahars, policymakers and implementers must rely on generalized or anecdotal information to allocate resources. Given Musahars' geographic concentration and unique socio-cultural drivers (extreme landlessness, near-zero female literacy, caste exclusion), targeted strategies likely require different mixes of cash transfers, proof-of-schooling incentives, legal documentation drives, and community-norm change than those used in less-marginalized populations. The absence of high-quality Musahar data thus perpetuates underinvestment and mismatched programming.

Research gaps and recommended objective (concise)

Primary research gap: lack of representative, caste/ethnicity-disaggregated quantitative prevalence data and age-at-marriage distributions for Musahar (Mushar) women and girls, and paucity of rigorous evaluations of interventions tailored to Musahar social contexts.

Recommended research objective for future work (one clear statement): To estimate the prevalence and age-at-marriage distribution among Musahar girls and young women in selected Terai districts using a representative sampling design, and to analyse Musahar-specific socioeconomic, educational and normative determinants of early marriage using mixed-methods so as to inform targeted interventions.

Conclusion

The Musahar community in Nepal faces multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities that make early marriage both a symptom and a perpetuator of deprivation. While national surveys document high child-marriage prevalence overall, Musahar-specific prevalence is inadequately quantified. Existing ethnographic and NGO reports strongly indicate extremely early marriages are common in Musahar settlements, but representative epidemiological data and rigorous intervention evaluations are needed. Filling this evidence gap should be a priority for

researchers and policymakers who aim to end child marriage in Nepal equitably — otherwise the most marginalised groups risk being left behind.

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