

**Prevalence of Child Marriage and its Associated Factors**  
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### Abstract

*The purpose of the research is to study the prevalence of child marriage. Further, it aimed to assess the associate factors of child marriage. Since mixed method of data collection and analysis was used in this study, this researched was based on an explanatory sequential research design. Since the study used secondary sources of data, it was based on a census-style survey of the Bhimphedi Rural Municipality that included all marriages (569 cases) that took place within the previous three years of the survey date. This study observed 34.3% prevalence of child marriage in the study area in which prevalence was found high among Buddhist (41.6%) from religion group, female (49.5%) from gender group, basic level of education (80.2%) from level of education group, lower economic class (72.7%) from economic class group, single family (43.1%) from type of family group, arrange marriage (37.2%) from nature of marriage group, and Chepang (52.0%) in cast group. Since the p-values for selected socio-demographic characteristics of married person were < 0.05 except the nature of marriage, this study concludes that prevalence of child marriage is significant with religion, gender, level of education, economic class, and caste/ethnicity of the married people. To avoid the practice of child marriage in Nepal, multi-sectoral actions and policies should be developed and strictly implemented.*

**Keywords:** Child, Child marriage, Bhagi Marriage<sup>1</sup>, Family with Poverty, and Indigenous group

<sup>1</sup>In Nepali Society, Bhagi Marriage refers to getting married without parental consent after a love affair.

## 1. Introduction

Child marriage is a widespread practice in many societies, and it is linked to structural and socio-cultural factors. The structural factors include the legal and policy frameworks pertaining to adolescent protection. Child marriage can be attributed to a lack of access to quality services like schools, health care, and social welfare, as well as low socioeconomic opportunities, poor infrastructure and connectivity that isolates certain groups from larger social networks, poverty, conflicts, and natural disasters (Shakya, 2012).

According to the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), child marriage is most common in poor and rural communities. According to the report, the majority of the effects of child marriage are observed in girls (Maharjan et al., 2012).

According to Judith and Clark (2004), most countries have declared that the legal minimum age for marriage is 18; however, despite these restrictions, over 100 million girls are expected to marry in the next decade (Shakya, 2012).

Although these factors vary by context, poverty is one of the major factors underlying early marriage. Evidence indicates that impoverished families perceive a young girl as a financial burden, and that securing her marriage allows the household to transfer the burden of caring for her to others (Maharjan et al., 2012).

A child is defined as someone under the age of 18 (Judith & Clark, 2004). To ensure children's rights, the Nepalese Constitution of 2072 recognised children's rights as a fundamental right and included a separate provision related to children's rights in Article 39 (COL, 2015). There are policies, rules, and legal provisions in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; Local Government Management Act, 2074; Children Act, 2075; Child Friendly Local Governance National Strategy, 2068, National Policy on Children 2069, and National Strategy for Ending Child Marriage 2072. Various provisions have been made in these agreements to protect children's rights (Maharjan et al., 2012).

Marriage before the age of 20 is, on the other hand, considered child marriage. The legal age for marriage is set at 20 years in the Criminal Code of 2074. For the first time in Nepal's constitutional history, child marriage was mentioned as a violation of children's rights and accepted as a punishable crime (COL, 2017).

Every person has the natural right to choose whether or not to marry. Although the right of each and every citizen to marry the person of their choice and to determine their life prospect should be guaranteed, the minimum age for marriage has been set because if they marry before the age of twenty, they will not be physically and mentally mature, putting their lives in danger (Irwin, 2021).

Article 39 of Nepal's 2072 Constitution, Clause 5, states that no child shall be subjected to child marriage, illegal trafficking, kidnapping, or hostage-taking, and that child marriage is punishable and the victim is entitled to compensation in accordance with the law (COL, 2015). Muluki (Civil) Criminal Code, 2074, defines child marriage as a marriage-related offence, and it states that child marriage is automatically annulled. Further, The Child Girls Act, 2075 defines arranging a child's marriage or marrying a child as an offence against a child, and if such an act is committed, a fine of up to seventy-five thousand rupees and imprisonment for up to three years are possible penalties (COL, 2017).

Various perspectives from sociology, anthropology, economics, and other disciplines can be included in a theoretical framework for understanding child marriage. The social exchange theory is one theoretical framework that can be applied to child marriage. People engage in behaviours and relationships based on the perceived costs and benefits of those behaviours and relationships, according to this theory. In the context of child marriage,

families may believe that the advantages of marrying off their daughter outweigh the disadvantages. For example, the family may view marriage as a means of securing their daughter's future while reducing their own financial burden (Psaki et al., 2021)

The social construction of gender theory is another theoretical framework that can be applied to child marriage. This theory contends that society constructs and reinforces gender roles and expectations, and that these constructions vary across cultures and time periods. The expectation that girls should be married off at a young age may be viewed as a cultural construct that reinforces patriarchal values and limits the agency of girls and women in the context of child marriage (Psaki et al., 2021).

Child marriage has different theoretical foundations depending on the context and culture in which it occurs. Child marriage is rooted in tradition in some cultures and is seen as a way to improve family ties and maintain financial stability. Poverty and the belief that planning to marry off a daughter will lessen the family's financial burden may push child marriage in other cultures (Psaki et al., 2021)

From a sociological perspective, child marriage can be viewed as an embodiment of patriarchal societies in which girls and women are viewed as inferior and have little control over their own lives (MacQuarrie, 2019). Such societies' social norms and expectations frequently lead to the early marriage of girls, who are often viewed as a burden on the family and society and are married off to protect them from perceived threats or to ensure their economic security (Bicchieri, 2012).

While research has been beneficial in increasing investment and improving activity on child marriage, there are still a number of gaps in our understanding of child marriage, particularly in areas that have either been neglected or have come into sharper focus in recent years. As a result, this research has been designed to better understand the prevalence and associated factors of child marriage in the study area.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

This research was carried out to fulfil the following objectives:

- To study the prevalence of child marriage.
- To assess the associate factors of child marriage.

### **1.2 Hypothesis of the Study**

The hypothesis to test presented below was developed as a pre-assumed result of this research.

- Socio-demographic characteristics (gender, economic class, educational level, caste, religion, nature of marriage, and types of family) associate to child marriage.

## **2. Methods**

This study is based on secondary data source which was obtained from an evaluation survey programme conducted in 2019 in Bhimphedi Rural Municipality with the assistance of Nepal Plan International, Nepal, and carried out by Bhimphedi Rural Municipality and Community Development Center. Because this is a household survey study with some individual studies included, an explanatory sequential research design was used for this study. Although there were 4821 households in Bhimphedi village municipality in the 2011 AD national census, only 4567 households were found during the time of data collection. The survey recorded 569 cases of marriages in Bhimphedi Rural Municipality during the last three years of survey time. Because the study used a census method, the universe of this study included all cases of marriage (569). It examined the prevalence of marriage as well as its associated social and demographic aspects. The survey used a household questionnaire to collect data, which was used to determine the prevalence of child marriage and its associated factors for this study. Further, researcher applied case study based by selecting the cases.

Purposively, the data was tabulated and analysed using the Windows Statistical Software SPSS, Version 26. The findings were described using descriptive statistics, and the study's hypothesis was tested using chi-square test as a correlation statistics. Similarly, narrative analysis was used to present case studies gathered during the research, and quantitative research findings were justified by analysing the case study as qualitative findings.

**3. Results**

**3.1 Characteristics of Older Population**

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the study population who had married within the last three years. In terms of religion, Buddhism was followed by 47.8% of the study population, Hinduism 47.8%, and Christianity 3.2%. Similarly, gender was identified as a significant characteristic of married people in the study. The study discovered that females outnumbered males (51.5%). Furthermore, the study examined at the educational status of married people and discovered that nearly one-third of married people had a higher level of education, one-fourth were illiterate, 23.7% had a secondary level of education, and 17.8% had a basic level of education.

**Table 1** Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Study Population

Social characteristics	Responses	Count	Percentage
Religion	Hinduism	272	47.8%
	Christian	18	3.2%
	Buddhism	279	49.0%
Gender	Male	276	48.5%
	Female	293	51.5%
Level of Education	Illiterate	143	25.1%
	Basic Level	101	17.8%
	Secondary Level	135	23.7%
Economic Class	Higher Level	190	33.4%
	Lower	99	17.4%
	Medium	348	61.2%
Types of Family	High	122	21.4
	Single	255	44.8%
	Joint	314	55.2%
Nature of Marriage	Love marriage <sup>2</sup>	120	21.1%
	Bhagi Marriage	312	54.8%
	Arrange Marriage	137	24.1%
Caste	Brahmin	54	9.5%
	Chepang	30	5.3%
	Chhetri	25	4.4%
	Magar	31	5.4%
	Bishokarma	85	14.9%
	Newar	17	3.0%
	Tamang	312	54.8
	Others	15	2.6%

N=569

Source: Household Survey 2019

<sup>2</sup>In Nepali society, love marriage refers to a marriage after a love relationship with the consent of the parents.

Similarly, the study used the structure of a married person's family as a significant factor and discovered that approximately 55.2% of married people lived in joint families, while the remaining 44.8% lived in single families. According to Table 1, Bhagi marriage performed the highest volume of marriage cases (54.8%), followed by arrange marriage (24.1%), and love marriage (21.1%). The study used caste as another factor to investigate the relationship between child marriage and found Tamang to be the largest ethnic group, accounting for more than half of married people (54.8%), followed by Biswakarma 14.9%, Brahmin 9.5%, Magar 5.4%, Chepang 5.3%, Chhetri 4.4%, and Newar 3.0%.

### **3.2 Prevalence of Child Marriage and its Associated Socio-economic Factors**

More than one-third (34.3%) of the studied population married for the first time before the age of 20 in Bhimphedi rural municipality, with a significantly higher percentage Buddhists population. Table 2 presents more than two-fifths (41.6%) of young Buddhists married for the first time before the age of 20, which was found to be the highest proportion than Hinduism (27.9%) and Christianity (33.3%), as the chi-square value of 11.304 along with degree of freedom 2 for the categorical table of frequency distribution of Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism getting married before the age of 20 is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. This suggests that young Buddhists are more likely than other religions to marry at a young age, implying that child marriage among young Buddhists is prevalent in the study area.

Furthermore, the study discovered that females outnumbered males by a significant margin (49.5% vs. 18.1%), as chi-square value of 62.097 along with degree of freedom 1 for the contingency table of frequency distribution of males and females getting married before the age of 20 is significant at  $p < 0.05$  level. This indicates that girls are more likely than boys to marry at a young age, implying that early marriage among girls is still common in Nepali society.

Similarly, Table 2 shows that Nearly four out of every five (80.2%) young people with basic level of education married before the age of 20, compared to 48.1%, 32.2%, and 3.2% for those with secondary, no formal education (illiterate), and higher levels of education, respectively. The chi-square value is 186.734 with degree of freedom 3 for the categorical table of frequency distribution of married persons who marry before age 20 according to educational level is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. This suggests that young people with basic level of education are more likely than other educational level to marry at a young age, implying that child marriage among young people with basic level of education is prevalent in the study area.

More than seven out of every ten (72.7%) young people with lower economic status marry before the age of 20, compared to 28.2% and 20.5% for those with medium and high economic status respectively. The chi-square value is 81.047 with degree of freedom 2 for the categorical table of frequency distribution of married persons who marry before age 20 according to educational status is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. This suggests that young people with lower economic status are more likely than other economic status to marry at a young age, implying that child marriage among young people with poverty is prevalent in the study area. In this regard, the researcher created a case study that depicts poverty as a cause of child marriage in the study area presented in the given box.

**Case study I: Case of child marriage because of poverty**

*Samita Lama (name changed) is my name. I am now 20 years old. I completed my studies until the tenth grade. My father committed suicide when I was eleven years old. He previously worked as a wage labourer in other people's homes. The financial situation of our family was dire. My uncle married me off to a 17-year-old boy when I was in class 10 at the age of 16. I have a sibling. She married at the age of 18 as well. When I married, I had no idea about child marriage. My mother married a man from another village as a widow after my sister got married. Prior to marriage, she worked for a living.*

*We only had one kathpakho Bari at the time of my marriage. It housed a small hut for us. Except for some vegetables, there were no other agricultural products. Father was depressed. When he was healthy, he used to work. He died prematurely due to financial difficulties in properly treating the disease. Following that, the mother struggled to raise her two daughters. Because of my mother's grief, my uncle arranged for me to marry a boy from his village. I wanted to finish my education at the village school. I didn't want to get married at the time. It doesn't hurt to eat, so I was coerced into marrying. After my marriage, the school was far away, and I had to do housework, so there was no way for me to continue my studies.*

*Now I believe that if my family's financial situation had been better, my sister and I would not have married at such a young age and suffered this fate.*

Nearly two-fifths (37.2%) of arranged marriage cases were discovered to marry before the age of 20, compared to 35.3% and 28.3% for those who married through the system of Bhagi and love marriage, respectively. The chi-square value is 2.544 with degree of freedom 2 for the categorical table of frequency distribution of married persons who marry before age 20 according to the nature of marriage is insignificant at the  $p > 0.05$  level. This implies that child marriage among young people related to all systems of marriage is prevalent in the study area. In this regard, the researcher developed a case study depicting Bhagi marriage, which leads to child marriage in the study area shown in the box.

**Case study I: Case of child marriage through Bhagi Marriage**

*I am Sujan Lama (name changed). I'm 21 years old. I am currently residing in the Bhimphedi Rural Municipality. I live in this Rural Municipality's Ward 3 with my family. Our family was already dependent on subsistence farming, and we continue to do so today. In general, the age for administering SEE is 16 years of continuous study. However, we started school late in the village due to the repetition of classes due to not paying attention to studies; when I was 18, I only studied in class 9. I was in class 9 and walking together with a 16-year-old student of the same race, we fell in love. When I got home from school one day, I boldly proposed to the girl, but the girl initially refused. I persuaded the girl to marry me because I was always close to her. We went to Phupu's house in Indrasarobar Rural Municipality on the 16th of Jeshta 2073, without considering the family's financial situation, education, or age, and stayed there. It is considered normal in our caste to seduce a girl, regardless of her age; it is not as harsh as in other castes/ethnic. Our responsibilities increased after we married on our own accord, and we both stopped studying. Despite the fact that my friends went abroad, I stayed at home. I've had two children in three years, and their upbringing has been fraught with difficulties. I want to give them a good education, but I don't have much money. Nowadays, I believe I made a huge mistake by deciding to marry before reaching my legal marriage age. If I hadn't married at the time, I would have pursued a higher education, worked for the government, or taught in a village school.*

More than two-fifths (43.1%) of young people who lived in single families married before the age of 20, compared to 27.1% who lived in joint family, as chi-square value of 16.127 along with degree of freedom 1 for the contingency table of frequency distribution of married person lived in single and joint family getting married before the age of 20 is significant at  $p < 0.05$  level. This suggest that young people who lived in single family are more likely than joint family to marry at a young age, implying that child marriage among young people lived in single family is prevalent in the study area.

**Table 2:** Prevalence of Child Marriage and its Associated Socio-economic Factors

Prevalence of Child Marriage		Responses		N	%		
		Yes	No	195	34.3		
				374	65.7		
Social characteristics	Responses	Child Marriage	No Child Marriage			Sig. Value	Chi-square Value
		N	%	N	%		
Religion	Hinduism	76	27.9	196	72.1	0.004	11.304 df=2
	Christian	5	33.3	12	66.7		
	Buddhism	116	41.6	163	58.4		
Gender	Male	50	18.1	226	81.9	0.000	62.097 df=1
	Female	145	49.5	148	51.5		
Level of Education	Illiterate	46	32.2	97	44.44	0.000	186.734 df=4
	Basic Level	81	80.2	20	47.13		
	Secondary Level	65	48.1	70	66.38		
Economic Class	Higher Level	6	3.2	184	96.8	0.000	81.047 df=2
	Lower	72	72.7	27	27.3		
	Medium	98	28.2	250	71.8		
	High	25	20.5	97	79.5		
Types of Family	Single	110	43.1	145	56.9	0.000	16.127 df=1
	Joint	85	27.1	229	72.9%		
Nature of Marriage	Love	34	28.3	86	71.7	0.280	2.544 df=2
	Bhagi Marriage	110	35.3	202	64.7		
	Arrange Marriage	51	37.2	86	62.8		
	Brahmin	3	5.6	51	94.4		
	Chepang	13	52.0	12	48.0		
	Chhetri	5	16.1	26	83.9		
	Magar	24	28.2	61	71.8		
Caste	Bishokarma	11	36.7	19	63.3	0.000	35.196 df=7
	Newar	6	35.3	11	64.7		
	Tamang	127	40.7	185	59.3		
	Others	6	40.0	9	60.0		

N=569, df= degree of freedom

More than half (52.0%) of Chepang young people marry before the age of 20, compared to 40.7%, 36.7%, 35.3%, 28.2%, 16.1%, and 5.6% of Tamang, Bishokarma, Newar, Magar, Chhetri, and Brahmin young people. The categorical table of frequency distribution of married persons who marry before the age of 20 according to different caste and ethnicity has a chi-square value of 35.196 with a degree of freedom of 6 and is significant

at the  $p < 0.05$  level. This implies that young people from Indigenous, Dalit, and Janajati families are more likely than other castes and ethnic groups to marry at a young age, implying that child marriage among young people is prevalent in the study area among Indigenous, Dalit, and Janajati families.

#### **4. Result and Discussions**

This study discovered more than one-third (34.3%) of child marriage cases in the study area, which is slightly lower than the study conducted by World Vision Nepal (46.2%) at the national level (Maharjan et al., 2012), but significantly higher than the study conducted by Kapilvastu in 2021. (Shakya, 2021). This study discovered a higher percentage of child marriage among females than males (49.5% vs. 18.1%), which is similar to the results of the Kapilvastu study (23.6% vs. 9.6%) in patterns although the prevalence is very high (Shakya, 2021) and also similar to the World Vision Nepal study (52.3% vs 33.8%) at the national level (Maharjan et al., 2012). The finding of the studies also supports the social construction of gender theory because marriage of girls at a young age may be viewed as a cultural construct (Psaki et al., 2021). Furthermore, this study discovered a higher prevalence of child marriage among Buddhists, but the practise of child marriage was found to be lowest among Christians. This result is more similar to the World Vision Nepal study because the latter reveals that child marriage is least common among Christians (Maharjan et al., 2012). Child marriage is more common among the indigenous castes and ethnic groups than among the Brahmin and Chhetri castes and ethnic groups, according to the findings of a study conducted by Kapilvastu in 2021. (Shakya, 2021). Furthermore, the study discovered that child marriage is more common among people with a basic level of education, in contrast to a study conducted by World Vision Nepal, which discovered that child marriage is most common among the illiterate (Maharjan et al., 2012). This study suggests that child marriage is common among people with lower economic status, implying that child marriage is common among poor people. Furthermore, this study contributes to the understanding of social exchange theory, which states that people engage in behaviours and relationships based on the perceived costs and benefits of those behaviours and relationships. Families may believe that the benefits of marrying off their daughter outweigh the disadvantages in the context of child marriage (Psaki et al., 2021).

This study's findings suggest that parental poverty is strongly linked to the practise of child marriage. Furthermore, this study found that young people raised in a single family are more likely than those raised in a joint family to marry at a young age, indicating that the prevalence of child marriage is significantly higher in single families than in joint families.

Finally, this study tested the hypothesis that was developed during the research, revealing that there is a significant association of child marriage prevalence with all socio-demographic variables except nature of marriage because the p value for them was less than 0.05 based on the chi-square statistic, but such p-value was greater than 0.05 for the nature of marriage variable.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Despite the fact that the government has implemented several policies and programmes to combat child marriage, this study discovered a remarkable prevalence in the study area. Furthermore, the study concludes that the prevalence of child marriage is significantly associated with the married person's religion, gender, economic class, family type, level of education, and caste/ethnicity but the association was found insignificant with nature marriage (love marriage, Bhagi marriage, and Arrange marriage).

## 6. Implications

Based on the above findings, the following implications for ending child marriage are proposed. Baseline survey research should be conducted to cover multi-sectoral aspects of child marriage in order to understand its causes and control them. Similarly, this study did not depict the effects of child marriage among married people in order to understand its consequences. As a result, research should be conducted to learn about the consequences of child marriage in the study area. To avoid the practice of child marriage in Nepal, multi-sectoral actions and policies should be developed and strictly implemented.

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