



Stolen Childhood and Desolate Future: On Child Marriage in the Makawanpur's Chepang Community

DRONA BUDHATHOKI

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Drona Budhathoki

Makawanpur Multiple Campus, Hetauda

dronammc202@gmail.com

KEYWORDS

Chepang community
Child marriage & rights
Traditional norms & values
Agricultural farming system
Cultural practices
Poverty

ABSTRACT

Child marriage remains a critical issue not only in Nepal but globally, predominantly affecting South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In Nepal, the Terai region, rural areas, particularly among economically disadvantaged and Dalit communities, faces alarmingly high rates of child marriage. Main objective of this study is to investigate the causes and consequences of child marriage in the Chepang Community. This phenomenon is driven by poverty, social pressure to maintain ties, and the misconception that it offers protection. ADD Primary data has directly been taken from the Chepang community through interview, and Previous studies, book, articles, bulletin, journal are used as a secondary data. This paper employs qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews with twenty households and case studies involving two Chepang women, to explore the causes and consequences of child marriage in the study area. Its consequences are profound, directly impacting girls' health and education. Many girls drop out before completing primary education due to domestic responsibilities like cooking and household chores. Early pregnancies, despite physical immaturity, contribute to high maternal and child mortality rates. The statement effectively highlights the multifaceted issue of child marriage in the Chepang community, touching on key factors such as socio-cultural norms, purity, economic pressures, and educational limitations. It also emphasizes the negative impacts of early marriage on health, education, and economic independence, reinforcing cycles of poverty and gender inequality. The proposed solutions education, legal enforcement, awareness, and promoting gender equality are crucial for addressing this issue. However, a deeper exploration of specific interventions tailored to the Chepang community's context could further strengthen the argument.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Chepang are one of Nepal's most disadvantaged indigenous groups and are classified under the 'highly marginalized' category on the basis of a set

of socio-economic indicators, such as population size, language, literacy rate, house type, landownership, occupation, and access to higher education. Although no longer a nomadic tribe, the Chepang have largely preserved their unique tribal identity by maintaining their traditional knowledge system and continuing to practice animism. Their language, which they themselves call Chyo-bang (Chyo means hilltop and Bang stone), belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family and is closely related to the speech of the Raute and Raji, two others marginalized (endangered) communities of Nepal. Chepang is recognized as one of the indigenous communities by the state, predominantly residing in the surrounding areas of the Mahabharat mountain range. The western part of Makwanpur, the northern part of Chitwan, and the southern region of Dhading feature the dense settlements of Chepang, according to the association. The Chepang settlements also exist in Gorkha, Tanahun, and Lamjung. According to the national census of 2078 BS (2021), the Chepang community is dispersed across 26 districts in Nepal, with a total population of 84,364 (0.29%).

The Chepang, an indigenous group in Nepal, suffer from widespread poverty, with around 90% living below the poverty line. Despite Nepal outlawing child marriage in 1963, between 45% to 86% of Chepang girls typically marry between the ages of 12 and 15 in Makwanpur. This practice persists in Chepang communities like Kakada, Bharta, Sarikhet, Kalikatar, Khairang, and Dandakharka, among others. (Bista, 2018) underscore that the Chepang primarily reside in the north-western part of Makwanpur district. Poverty remains a significant issue among them, leading to limited education, awareness, and income opportunities, which may contribute to the prevalence of child marriage. Implementing agroforestry plantation practices could address some of these challenges, but further research is necessary to fully understand the underlying causes and implications of early marriage among the Chepang (Chhetri & Silwal, 2018; Panta, 1979). Due to the absence of arable land,

they resided in the forest and consumed kandamuls. Finding wild sources of food like Githa and Bhyakur, which were once plentiful in the forest, has become increasingly difficult for the Chepang community. As a result, they are forced to seek work in nearby villages for low wages or rely on a diminished supply of these foraged foods. They may suffer from malnutrition for ten or twelve days. When they were hungry, they took out a loan on land from a moneylender. When they borrow land, they want to keep it forever. If the landowners are unable to return the land, some of them remain in the money lenders' residence in the interest of the capital. When Chepangs farm on their little plot of land on a steep hill, they are unable to produce and grow.

The Chepang are historically residing on very different terrain of middle hill in central Nepal. Since their livelihoods were totally depended on hunting, gathering and horticulture, they did not require plain arable land. However, as Chepang started setting in a fixed locality, they needed proper land for farming cereals and lentils. Due to being situated on steep slope and having low productivity of the land, Chepang discovered the shifting cultivation practice (Sharma, 2011).

The Chepang's present issues stem from a generalized marginalization and discrimination based on socioeconomic status, culture, and politics, which has led to poor access to jobs, services, and education. The Chepangs' traditional way of life has been severely strained by a number of factors, including a high rate of illiteracy, a lack of protective laws, land title rules, and regulations to guarantee traditional and alternative livelihood choices, and the inadequate execution of pertinent legislation. Many stakeholders, including Chepangs, have stated that in order to generate money, it is necessary to establish economically and environmentally sound activities. These activities should concentrate on growing into new markets and filling unmet needs. For instance, boosting youth employment locally and supporting small companies (UN, 2012).

In the study of Chepangs' Struggle for Survival: Views from Makwanpur and Chitwan Districts it was stated that, the remoteness of Chepang settlements is regarded as one of the main reasons behind these low literacy rates. Most Chepang villages have only a primary school and students need to travel three to five hours every day, usually over sloped and difficult terrain, to attend secondary level schools. Based on the literatures reviewed, it was widely reported that Chepangs live in a state of chronic food deficiency and have been facing severe starvation every year. Only one percent of the Chepangs have cereal food surplus and about 60% of the families have food that does not last more than six months (NCA, 2004). For rest of the time, they eat the wild food items – namely hunting wild animals, birds, fruits, yams, nettles and tubers. The serious shortage appears primarily due to small land holding and low yield of marginal unproductive land (Gurung, 1995).

1.1 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to investigate the causes and consequences of child marriage in the Chepang indigenous tribe in Raksirang Rural Municipality, Ward No. 7, Makwanpur district.

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The main significance of this research lies in its in-depth examination of the causes and consequences of child marriage in the Chepang community, providing insights into how poverty, socio-cultural pressures, and misconceptions drive the practice, while highlighting its devastating impacts on girls' health, education, and economic independence. This study contributes valuable, context-specific knowledge, offering a foundation for targeted interventions to combat child marriage and promote gender equality in marginalized communities.

1.3 RESEARCH GAP

A research gap is a question or a problem that has not been answered by any of the existing studies or research

within your field. Sometimes, a research gap exists when there is a concept or new idea that hasn't been studied at all. The routine, traditional lifestyle of the Chepang tribal communities, the place of women in the Chepang tribal community, and their changing lifestyle have been studied for a long time, but there is a lack of research on the causes and consequences of child marriage in these communities.

1.4 LITERATURE REVIEW

Child marriage has a greater impact on the life course of women due to the health implications of pregnancy and dropping out of school. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2011), child marriages are 'driven by deep-seated social and religious views' and are a 'violation of human and child rights. This research intends to understand the perceptions and attitudes of women in Nepal regarding the impact of child marriage on health. A dearth of qualitative studies currently explores the effect of child marriage on health in Nepal, particularly the health-seeking behaviors of child brides. Understanding women's views is paramount to improve policies, both to prevent the incidence of child marriage in the first place and to deal with the health consequences of those already affected.

There are three main types of early or child marriage in Ethiopia: Promissory marriage, whereby a verbal promise is made at infancy or even childbirth by the parents to have their children gets married. In child marriage, children under the age of 10 are wedded whereas adolescent marriage involves girls aged between 10 and 15. In most cases, the child bride is taken to her in-laws immediately after the wedding; in other cases, the parents agree that the girl stays with her parents until she is mature enough to live with her husband. In general, most of these children were married to older men, which presents serious communication problem, which is essential for a happy and successful marriage (Types of Marriage, Rodgers, 2012). Gynecol (2009) states that although they happen all across the world, weddings

involving children under the age of 18 are more common in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Child marriage is a violation of human rights that has an immediate impact on girls' health, education, psychological well-being, and their children's health (as mentioned in Nour, 2009). There are significant incidents that after marriage, girls stopped attending school. They experience depression, have had STIs, and have an effect on maternal mortality. Their children are more likely to be born prematurely, which increases the risk of neonatal or infant mortality. Child marriage often happens to those under the age of eighteen. It has an impact on a child's education in addition to their health. Even so, it also raises the psychological risk of depression.

Child marriage is defined as 'a marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18', and although both genders experience the phenomenon, it is evident that girls are disproportionately affected. Approximately 12 million girls are married during childhood each year, particularly in South Asia. The literature construes that child marriages are commonly instigated by poverty, a lack of education and societal views amongst various other factors. Unfortunately, the consequences of child marriage for the girls involved are both vast and severe. Existing research demonstrates that child marriages increase the incidence of early pregnancies, maternal mortality, school dropout rates and the risk of violence.

Nepal has been classed as one of the worlds' least developed countries and has a population of approximately 30 million residents. Child marriages are particularly problematic in Nepal, affecting 33% of girls before the age of 18 and 8% of girls before the age of 15. The practice is predominantly witnessed in rural areas, where 83% of the population resides, and many of the causes and consequences are consistent with the reasons mentioned above. Although Nepal's legal age for marriage is 20 (or 18 with parental consent), the law is hardly implemented or adhered to. Nepal's government has devised a 'National strategy to end child

marriage by 2030'. The strategy consists of 6 components, including the need to 'educate' and 'empower' girls, 'implement laws and policies', 'engage' men and communities, and 'strengthen and provide services' MOE. (2014).

The Chepangs are highly engaged in early marriage, children of 14, 15 years are getting married by the agreement of their parents. Because of the early marriage they don't get chance to focus in their studies as well it highly affects their physical and mental health. The age when girls need their parents and their friends to play with, they are being sent to someone else's house and are asked to do household work. At the very early age, girls are giving birth to the child, who is not good for the health of both mother and child (UNRCHC, 2012). Child marriage not only denies girls an education, it often makes them vulnerable to a cycle of discrimination, domestic violence and abuse. But it is always not true for all of them, some Chepang also believes that if child marriage is to be eradicated there should be close coordination among government sectors dealing with health, education, poverty and culture and also give priority to basic schooling.

Nepal has multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi customary practices. In this regard, there are its own methods of the marriage system. There are different kinds for getting married such as Arrange marriage, Court marriage, Love marriage, and other cultural marriage in the different community. The types of marriage prevalent in Nepal are as follows:

- **Arranged marriage**

Hindus in Nepal have a strong tradition of arranged weddings since they consider marriages to be formed in heaven. When their child reaches marriageable age, the parents search for the bridegroom through friends or family; these individuals are known as "Lami" in Nepali. Following the groom's or bride's search, the parents will visit priests or astrologers for advice and confirmation of whether the couple is a match. The star signs of the bride and groom are matched for this reason. Every aspect of the wedding planning involves the

intermediary, or lami, who serves as a messenger for both families.

- **Love marriage**

Nowadays, arranged marriages are becoming more and more common in Nepal because the younger generation chooses their own life partner. If both sets of parents approve, the wedding is planned in accordance with the arranged marriage; if not, one family leaves the other and marries themselves to start a new family. Later, the parents call the other family to return because they are unable to leave their children alone for an extended period of time. In this case, they accept whatever mistake the children made because, in their eyes, they will always be children.

- **Court Marriage**

Some of the couples when they are happy with each other's and even their parents are agree to get marriage then they just will go to the court and get marriage certificate.

- **Polyandry system in Nepal**

The polyandrous marriage system is also practiced by the inhabitants of Nepal's northwest, in regions like Humla, Dolpo, and Mustang. Additionally, the high Himalayan area that borders Tibet is home to the Tibeto Burman Mongoloid people. Bhote (Tibetan) people are the broad term used to describe the people who speak Tibetan in certain regions. Certain factors contribute to the polyandry custom in these communities, including the fact that it helps the family stay together and maintain its properties while also enabling them to adapt effectively to the hard ecological and climatic conditions. If all of the brothers in the family are married to different people, the farming land is small and the produce is quite low in relation to the labor involved in growing it.

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

This research, was conducted in Ward No. seven of Rakxirang Rural Municipality, Makwanpur District, the causes and consequences of child marriage within the Chepang community were examined using a descriptive framework for data collection and analysis. Consequently, the study utilized both primary and secondary

data sources. In the specified study area, the Chepang community consists of 78 households. Primary data were collected through interviews with twenty households and case studies involving two Chepang women. This research was prepared in the first week of May 2024 by collecting data with the help of Khem Bahadur Praja and Suresh Kumar Lama, two postgraduate students of Sociology.

2.1 STATUS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN CHEPANG COMMUNITY

The Constitution of Nepal designates marriage involving individuals under 20 years of age as child marriage, stipulating that those who facilitate such marriages will face three years of imprisonment and a fine of 75,000 rupees. According to Jhavindra Gyawali, district program coordinator of Ciwin Child Helpline, despite the legal provisions including the non-registration of child marriages and associated fines, effectively curbing child marriages remains a significant challenge in the region. Local authorities are working towards declaring their jurisdictions as child-friendly areas. Data collected over the past four years with assistance from the Sibin Helpline reveals the following statistics on child marriage incidents: 24 cases in the fiscal year 2075-076, 62 cases in 2076-077, 48 cases in 2077-2078, and 45 cases by the end of Chaitra in 2078-079. For the fiscal year 2079-2080, it was noted that within the Chepang community, decisions regarding child marriage were often facilitated through social media platforms like Facebook, Messenger, and phone conversations. Many children reported that their decisions to marry were influenced by casual conversations and friendships. Psychologists indicate that preventing child marriage is particularly challenging as many children fall in love without their parents' awareness (Ciwin Helpline Makawanpur 2024).

2.2 CAUSES OF CHILD MARRIAGE OF CHEPANG COMMUNITY

The Chepang community, an indigenous ethnic group primarily residing in

the hilly regions of central Nepal, is characterized by its distinct cultural practices, linguistic heritage, and traditional lifestyle. Despite their rich cultural identity, the Chepang people often face significant socio-economic challenges, including poverty, limited access to education, and inadequate healthcare facilities. These challenges are compounded by their geographical isolation and marginalization from mainstream development efforts. Child marriage is a deeply rooted practice within the Chepang community, influenced by a combination of socio-cultural norms, economic factors, and limited access to education. The prevalence of child marriage in this community can be attributed to several key factors:

2.2.1. PURITY

Girls' physical purity, often rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, is sometimes emphasized as crucial, leading to practices such as child marriage, which are particularly prevalent in certain regions. This emphasis can severely impact girls' academic opportunities, as early marriages often interrupt their education, limiting their future prospects and personal development. While preserving purity is seen as a virtue, it can also perpetuate gender inequality by prioritizing traditional roles over education and personal growth, thus hindering the potential for girls to contribute fully to their communities and societies. Promoting education and delaying marriage are essential steps in ensuring girls have the freedom to pursue their aspirations and achieve their full potential (Field survey, 2024).

2.2.2 POVERTY AND ECONOMIC INSECURITY

Poverty is one of the most significant drivers of child marriage. In many impoverished communities, marrying off a daughter can alleviate economic burdens in Chepang Community. All chepang families facing financial hardships may view child marriage as a strategy to reduce household expenses by transferring the economic responsibility of a girl to her husband's family. Additionally, the practice of dowry in

some cultures places further economic pressure on families, prompting early marriages to minimize dowry costs (Field survey, 2024).

2.2.3 LACK OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

In the Chepang community, the lack of educational opportunities is a significant driver of child marriage, as limited access to schools and educational resources, coupled with economic hardships, compels families to prioritize immediate economic survival over long-term educational investments for their daughters. Geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and traditional gender roles further exacerbate this issue, leading to high dropout rates among Chepang girls and reinforcing the perception that marriage is a more viable and culturally acceptable option. Consequently, these educational barriers perpetuate a cycle of poverty and early marriage, hindering the personal and socio-economic development of Chepang girls and their broader community (Field survey, 2024).

2.2.4 TRADITIONAL NORMS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES

Traditional norms and practices significantly contribute to the persistence of child marriage in the Chepang community, where cultural customs and social expectations perpetuate the practice. In this indigenous group, deeply entrenched beliefs prioritize early marriage as a means of securing social alliances and maintaining family honor. These norms are often rooted in historical contexts where early marriage was essential for social and economic stability. The community's adherence to patriarchal values further reinforces the perception that a girl's primary role is that of a wife and mother, thus diminishing the value placed on her education and personal development. Social pressures and fear of stigma drive families to marry off their daughters at a young age, viewing it as a way to ensure their daughters' protection and uphold familial reputation. These traditional practices create a cyclical pattern that continues to normalize and

sustain child marriage, despite its detrimental impact on the health, education, and overall well-being of Chepang girls (Field survey, 2024).

2.2.5 LACK OF AWARENESS

Child marriage among the Chepang community reflects a complex interplay of cultural traditions, socio-economic factors, and lack of awareness about its detrimental effects on children, especially girls. The Chepang, an indigenous group in study area, historically practiced early marriages as a way to ensure economic stability and social protection for girls. However, these marriages often disrupt girls' education and personal development, perpetuating cycles of poverty and gender inequality within the community. Despite efforts by NGOs and governmental initiatives to raise awareness and enforce legal prohibitions, deep-rooted cultural beliefs and remote geographical locations pose challenges in eradicating this practice entirely. Addressing child marriage among the Chepang requires a holistic approach that includes community engagement, education on human rights, and sustainable economic opportunities for families, empowering them to make informed choices that prioritize children's well-being and development over traditional norms (Field survey, 2024).

2.3 CASE STUDY

In this study, data were gathered by examining child marriage practices among women from two Chepang tribal communities. The analysis of this data is presented below.

2.3.1 CASE STUDY, 1 DHANIMAYA CHEPANG AGE: 27 YEAR (NAME CHANGED)

Dhanimaya Chepang of Raksirang 7 Dhirang in Makawnpur district has no smile on her lips, but her heart is full of tears. Ghanimaya married at the age of 13. Her husband died at the age of 28 after having 3 children. After the death of her husband, the problem of bringing up children has become too challenging for her. Married at just 13, her life is filled with hardships. "What to do by showing suffering to others,

she says that you have to suffer what is written in fate". She said, "There are sons Buddharam, who was suffering from abdominal swelling for a year, was taken to Bharatpur Hospital, but he died because he could not be treated due to lack of funds. Her sad days started when her husband died who fell ill as she started to live apart from her mother's house. "20,000 rupees loan taken for her husband's treatment, two starving children and herself pregnant," she said, recalling that, "I was unconscious for a few months, I couldn't think of anything." She said.

Buddharam's house had a plan to remove thatched roof and cover it with zinc. "But because I can't even change the thatch of the roof, I am reaping in the rain in the house where the water is leaking", she expressed her pain. For the interest of 20,000 rupees taken during the treatment of her husband, the moneylender used to take millet and corn produced every year. "She could keep enough food for 3-4 months", she said, "The moneylender takes all the grain produced." Along with the debt of the moneylender, she has the responsibility of educating her two sons from this year.

2.3.2 CASE STUDY, 2 ASAMAYA CHEPANG AGE 29 YEAR (NAME CHANGED)

Asamaya, from Raksirang 7 in Makwanpur, appears to have lost all joy, her laughter overshadowed by sadness. She did not marry young and has been burdened by the challenges of being a single parent. At 29, Asamaya has four children, aged between 13 and 5, and struggles to provide for them. To feed her family, she works as a wage laborer in the village. Her four children, including her 13-year-old son Bam Bahadur, 11-year-old daughter Sanumayan, and 8-year-old son Sriraj, attend Dhirang Primary School, often wearing old, torn uniforms.

Bam Bahadur, the eldest, is acutely aware of his mother's hardships. "Sometimes I work with my mother to earn wages," he says. During times of famine, he helps gather edible roots from the forest. He is in fifth grade but already contemplating

moving to the city in a few years to find work. Eight years ago, after her husband died, Asamaya separated from her in-laws and has since lived independently. Her home is a modest hut with a small paddy field where they keep bulls. She has not received any single woman allowance, and her husband passed away because they couldn't afford medical treatment.

2.4 CONCLUSION OF CASE STUDY

Marriage is an integral phase of the life process. However, the experiences of Dhanimaya, Ashmaya, and Anisha Chepong from Raksirang 7 exemplify how certain rituals and harmful practices can result in a painful journey. Within the village environment, it was observed that child marriages often occurred due to external incitement. These early marriages led to numerous difficulties, attributed to the immature age at which the marriages were conducted and the ensuing problems. Historically, there was a custom of compelling families to marry off their children at a young age. This included pre-birth arrangements for marriages by placing the "pong" in the house. However, contemporary instances of child marriage due to parental pressure have become negligible. Those who did undergo child marriages often eloped, leading to family, health, financial, and marital problems. The advent of information technology and social networks has facilitated meeting new people, but it has also been misused, leading to young love relationships that culminate in early marriages. Furthermore, the Chepong community has increasingly relied on market-sourced food, which seems to contribute to the early physical maturity of children, inadvertently influencing early marriages.

2.5 CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE

In the context of the study area Chepong community, child marriage carries significant consequences that impact various aspects of individuals' lives and community dynamics:

2.5.1 EDUCATIONAL DISRUPTION AND CONSTRAINTS

Child marriage within the Chepong community disrupts the educational paths of young girls significantly. When girls marry early, they frequently discontinue formal schooling, depriving them of opportunities to gain essential skills, knowledge, and social connections crucial for personal and professional growth. This interruption in education perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender disparity within the community, limiting girls' ability to achieve their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society.

2.5.1 HEALTH IMPLICATIONS FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Young brides among the Chepong community confront substantial health challenges, primarily stemming from early pregnancies and childbirth. Often physically underdeveloped and lacking access to adequate healthcare, these girls face heightened risks of pregnancy-related complications such as obstetric fistula, maternal mortality, and neonatal deaths. The convergence of early marriage and adverse health outcomes underscores an urgent necessity for targeted health interventions and reproductive health education aimed at alleviating these risks.

2.5.2 ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE AND IMPACT ON LIVELIHOODS

Child marriage reinforces economic dependency among young brides within the Chepong community. Married off early, these girls lack the skills and opportunities necessary for engaging in productive economic activities. As a result, they rely financially on their husbands and families, perpetuating cycles of poverty and restricting their economic independence. To mitigate these vulnerabilities, interventions are needed that focus on promoting education, vocational training, and economic empowerment initiatives specifically tailored to the needs of young married girls.

2.5.3 SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Child marriage carries significant social and psychological implications for young brides in the Chepang community. Separated from their familial and social networks during crucial developmental stages, these girls often experience isolation, diminished agency, and heightened susceptibility to domestic violence and abuse. The psychological impact of early marriage manifests in anxiety, depression, and trauma, adversely affecting their overall well-being and social integration. Effective responses should prioritize psychosocial support, community awareness initiatives, and legal safeguards to protect the rights and dignity of young brides.

2.5.4 INTERSECTION OF CULTURE, TRADITION, AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

The practice of child marriage among the Chepang community is deeply rooted in cultural norms, traditions, and socio-economic factors. Viewed as a means to enhance social status, ensure economic stability, and uphold family honor, early marriage reflects broader societal attitudes towards gender roles and responsibilities. Despite legal prohibitions and international human rights standards, enforcement remains inconsistent, particularly in remote areas where awareness of legal protections may be lacking. Addressing these intertwined factors necessitates a comprehensive approach involving community leaders, religious authorities, policymakers, and civil society organizations to challenge harmful norms, promote gender equality, and strengthen legal frameworks aimed at safeguarding children from early marriage.

3. DISCUSSION AND RESULT ANALYSIS

The Chepang tribes residing in the Mahabharat range of Nepal's hill area exhibit low levels of education, largely due to limited awareness and a persistent adherence to traditional beliefs and customs, as noted by Bista (2019), an experienced journalist specializing in

Chepang tribal studies. While the prevalence of early marriages among the Chepang has somewhat diminished over time, it remains a significant cultural practice alongside other traditional customs like widow marriages. Despite some societal shifts towards love marriages influenced by media exposure, the majority of households studied were elderly, highlighting a transition in marriage practices from traditional arranged marriages to more contemporary forms. This evolution signifies a notable social change within the Chepang community, historically rooted in nomadic lifestyles and characterized by entrenched superstitions and orthodox beliefs, including the persistent challenge of child marriage.

According to Adhikari's (2003) findings, a significant number of respondents among the Magi Chepangs marry between the ages of 13 to 18, indicating a prevalent practice of early or child marriages within this community. Legal provisions prohibit marriage beyond the age of 20, yet instances of child marriages persist within village settings, leading to considerable challenges and hardships due to the immature nature of such unions. Historically, familial pressure often compelled early marriages, with traditional customs such as betrothal before birth reinforcing these practices. However, contemporary trends suggest a decline in parental coercion for early marriages, with instances of self-initiated elopements causing family discord, health issues, financial instability, and overall adversity. Governmental and societal efforts to curb child marriage have been initiated, albeit with limited impact attributed partly to the escalating influence of information technology and social media. This technological advancement facilitates premature romantic relationships, exacerbating the prevalence of early marriages among the Chepang community, a trend further influenced by changes in dietary habits potentially accelerating physical maturation among youth.

Nour (2009) underscores that child marriage remains a pressing issue within the Chepang community, with a significant

portion of students dropping out between first and eighth grade, many due to early marriages. To address this, integrating a curriculum in schools aimed at raising awareness about the detrimental impacts of child marriage on health, life, and family is crucial. Without such educational efforts from an early age, exacerbated by the influence of advancing technology, child marriage is likely to persist as a significant challenge. Solving this issue requires concerted efforts at the local level, focusing on promoting education and supporting marriages occurring after the age of 20, while actively discouraging early marriages through enforcement measures.

4. CONCLUSION

The Chepang tribes are marginalized communities living in the foothills of the mountains. They have recently entered the rural agricultural society from nomadic occupations. Among them, child marriage has been going on for various reasons since the past. In other ethnic communities from Himal to Terai in Nepal, child marriage was also in the past, but these bad practices have disappeared, but the Chepang tribes living in the rural areas of Makwanpur district, which is the capital of Bagmati province, still have child marriage. In conclusion, child marriage in the Chepang community is a multifaceted issue driven by psychical purity, socio-cultural norms, economic pressures, lack of educational opportunities, traditional practices, and inadequate legal enforcement. Addressing this complex issue requires holistic interventions that empower girls through education, challenge harmful norms, provide economic opportunities for families, and strengthen legal protections. Efforts must focus on raising awareness, promoting gender equality, enhancing educational access, and enforcing laws to protect children from the harmful effects of early marriage. Only through concerted efforts can meaningful progress be made towards eliminating child marriage and ensuring a brighter future for Chepang girls and their communities. Child marriage among the Chepang community leads to

profound consequences that impact various aspects of individuals' lives and community dynamics. Educationally, it disrupts girls' paths by forcing them to drop out of school prematurely, limiting their opportunities for personal growth and perpetuating cycles of poverty and gender inequality. Health-wise, early pregnancies and childbirths expose young brides to significant health risks, including maternal mortality and obstetric complications, exacerbated by their physical immaturity and lack of access to adequate healthcare. Economically, child marriage reinforces dependence on husbands and families, restricting young brides' economic independence and perpetuating poverty within the community. Socially, early marriage isolates girls from their familial and social networks, exposing them to higher risks of domestic violence and psychological distress. Culturally, it perpetuates traditional gender roles and norms, hindering efforts towards gender equality and social progress within the Chepang community. Addressing these consequences requires comprehensive strategies that empower girls through education, promote awareness, and enforce legal protections to safeguard their rights and well-being.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Drona Budhathoki

Lecturer of Sociology, Makawanpur Multiple Campus, Hetauda

REFERENCES

1. **Adhikari, R. K.** (2003). Early marriage and childbearing: risks and consequences.
2. **Baral, B.** (2002). Analysis of Social Institutions and Processes: Bhuvan Prakashan, Biratnagar, Nepal
3. **Bastakoti et al.** (2008). Food insecurity and dependency of chepang communities on wild edible plants. Sustainable Forest Management and Poverty Alleviation, 21, 8-10. Retrieved from www.iufro.org
4. **Bista, P.** (2019, Feb 9). Kathmandu Post News-Child Marriage still in practice in Chepang community. (P. Bista, Compiler) Kathmandu, Bagamati, Nepal. Retrieved from <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/02/09/child-marriage-still-in-practice-in-the-chepang-community>.
5. **Budhathoki, D.,** (2023) The Extended Access Created by the Capitalist Economy,

- International Research Journal of Makawanpur Multiple Campus (IRJMMC) Vol. 4, No. 4, December 2023, ISSN 27-4999 (Online)
6. **Budhathoki D.** (2024) From Fields to Futures: Examining the Socioeconomic Shifts from Cardamom Cultivation in Eastern Nepal, International Research Journal of Makawanpur Multiple Campus (IRJMMC) Vol. 5, No. 3, June, 2024, ISSN 2717-4999 (Online)
 7. **Chhetri, R., & Silwal, U. K.** (2018). No Longer wild food utilization-farm based agroforestry production alleviate poverty: a case study of ethnics of Raksirang Rural Municipality within central Nepal. *J Agri Sci Food Res*, 9(243).
 8. **Crossman, A.** (2017). The Definition of Marriage in Sociology: Types, characteristics and the social function of the institution Curwen, N. (2016).
 9. **MOE.** (2014) (Ministry of Education). School Sector Reform Program/ Sector Wide Approach Extension Plan 2014/15-2015/16. Kathmandu:
 10. **Nnadi, I.** (2014). Early Marriage: A gender-based violence and a violation of women's human rights in Nigeria. *Journal of Politics and Law*, 7(3), 38.
 11. **Nour, N. M.** (2009). Child Marriage: A Silent Health and Human Rights issue. *Reviews in Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 2(1), 51-55.
 12. **Rai, T. K.** (2075) *Chepong Samudayako Bartamann Aabstha*. City of set Press Kathmandu. (Nepali Verson)
 13. **Rodgers, B.** (2012). Child Marriage in Ethiopia and its Associated Human Rights Volations. *Policy Journal*, 11-12.
 14. **UNICEF.** (2011). Child Marriage. UNICEF Information Sheet, 1-4.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Budhathoki, D. (2024). Stolen childhood and desolate future: On child marriage in the Makawanpur's Chepang community. *International Research Journal of MMC*, 5(4), 111–121.
<https://doi.org/10.3126/irjmmc.v5i4.70822>

Submitted: 19 July 2024

Accepted: 26 August 2024

Published: 30 September 2024

COPYRIGHT

©2024 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

International Research Journal of MMC (IRJMMC) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Research Management Cell, Makawanpur Multiple Campus, Hetauda

