



From Tradition to Transformation: Ending Child Marriage in Nepal

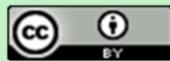
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Publishing Process

Received on: 15 Sept. 2025

Finalized to publish: 12 Oct 2025



Open Access 4.0

Published 12 Nov 2025

Abstract: There are 14,911,027 women in Nepal, comprising 51.13% of the total population. The total population of Nepal is 29,164,578, with 14,253,551 males (48.87%) and 5 % 15-19 age group, and 5.1% 20-24 5 (1.1). Marriage beyond 20 years is found to be better for females. Nepali women were married before reaching age 18, and about 10% were married before age

15. Asia ranks Nepal among its countries with the highest child marriage rates, which places it third in South Asia and eighth worldwide for girls aged 20-24 (≥ 1 in 3 by age 18). The research found the barriers to ending child marriage, such as poverty, lack of education, and awareness, but it has been declining. Meaningful reductions in early marriage need multi-sectoral action together with community engagement and policy enforcement, which supports global goals, including SDG 5.3.

Keywords: Child, Education, Marriage, Nepal, SDG.

Declaration: There is no conflict of interest.

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Introduction

The formal or informal union of children before their 18th birthday constitutes a severe violation of human rights, which produces enduring effects. The practice persists throughout developing regions despite global advancements.(1) There are 14,911,027 women in Nepal, comprising 51.13% of the total population. The total population of Nepal is 29,164,578, with 14,253,551 males (48.87%) and 13% 15-19 age group (1.1).

Global Prevalence and Trends

The current population of 640 million girls and women includes those who entered marriage before reaching adulthood, while 12 million girls become child brides annually. The percentage of young women aged 20-24 who married before the age of 18 decreased from 21% to 19% worldwide over the last five years. The current pace of progress indicates that eliminating child marriage would require approximately 300 years, but achieving SDG 5.3 by 2030 demands much faster advancement (2). The UNICEF/Child Marriage Data Portal shows the following regional prevalence rates:

- Sub-Saharan Africa: ~30.8% prevalence
- Central & Southern Asia (which includes South Asia): ~25.0%
- World average: ~18.6% (3)

Prevalence in Nepal

Asia ranks Nepal among its countries with the highest child marriage rates, which places it third in South Asia and eighth worldwide for girls aged 20–24 (≥ 1 in 3 by age 18). (4) The UNICEF/UNFPA reports show that more than one-third of Nepali women were married before reaching age 18, and about 10% were married before age 15. Boys in Nepal face one of the highest risks of becoming child grooms in the world, since more than 10% of them marry before reaching age 18.(5)

Drivers and Risk Factors:

Poverty, lack of education, patriarchal norms, and caste/ethnicity are central drivers globally and in Nepal. (5) The specific Nepalese context shows that families with lower education levels and female-headed households and Hindu or Muslim religious backgrounds tend to have higher early marriage rates.(6)

Health, Social & Economic Impacts: The practice of child marriage leads to early pregnancy, which results in higher risks of obstetric complications and maternal mortality, particularly among girls

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younger than 20.(2) The marriage of girls leads to school dropout and exposes them to higher risks of domestic and sexual violence. One in three married girls in Nepal experienced sexual violence and one in six reported physical violence.(5)

Future Outlook & Recommendations: The current pace of child marriage reduction falls short of achieving SDG target 5.3 by 2030 unless immediate action is taken. The fastest progress in South Asia will still take about 55 years to eliminate child marriage but sub-Saharan Africa needs more than 200 years to achieve this goal at its current rate.(2,3)

The legal prohibition of marriage under 20 in Nepal exists through constitutional law yet weak enforcement and traditional cultural practices continue to challenge legal advancements. The implementation of policy changes, such as raising the legal age, does not lead to success when there is no enforcement and community participation.(6,7)

Theoretical frameworks and programmatic models

Preferences–Options–Beliefs (POB) Model: The economic-behavioral decision-making framework explains child marriage as a logical choice that results from three elements: parental preferences and restricted choices, and dominant social beliefs. The framework unifies multiple partial explanations, including poverty, dowry, and conflict resolution, into a single analytical framework, which enables planners to evaluate drivers across different contexts.(8)

Social Norms Theory Applied to Religious Drivers: The social norms framework examines how religious and cultural norms influence child marriage practices. Practitioners can use this framework to analyze community norms and develop faith-based interventions by studying how religious beliefs interact with gender and age expectations in specific contexts.(9)

Tipping Point Programme (CARE TPI / TPP & TPP+): The Tipping Point Initiative of CARE implements a dual prevention system, which includes TPP (core) and TPP+. The TPP (core) program enables adolescent girls to develop their intrinsic and instrumental agency through self-efficacy development and SRHR knowledge acquisition and negotiation skills. The TPP+ model extends its reach by working with families and leaders and the community to transform social norms. The program exists as an 18-month package that underwent cluster RCTs in Nepal and Bangladesh to measure its effects on marriage timing and girls' agency and social norms.(10)



National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (Nepal)

The Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare established this National Strategy in 2016 as the main policy and implementation framework for Nepal. The strategy establishes five strategic pillars, which include legal enforcement and awareness and education and protection systems and multisector coordination, and SDG 5.3 goals.(11)

Theory of Change Framework (Girls Not Brides Nepal)

Girls Not Brides Nepal developed a shared national Theory of Change through multiple consultation levels that reached from community to district to national levels. The framework supports district and municipal action plans that focus on norm shifting and stakeholder awareness and evidence-informed interventions to stop child marriage.(12)

Slogans

- विवाह बारी २० बर्ष पारी
- हुन देउ पहिले उनको विकास, विहे गर्राई न तोड उसको आस
- यो उमेरमा त पढ्छन् बच्चा, विवाह गरी नबनाऊ कच्चा
- Books before bangles, dreams before dowries.
- Marriage can wait; childhood cannot.
- Every child deserves their day, don't throw their future away.

Conclusion

The practice of early marriage continues to be a major worldwide and national issue because Nepal, along with other regions, maintains cultural traditions and poverty levels and restricted educational access, which sustain this practice. The prevalence of early marriage continues to be high, especially among girls who are under 18 years old. The Preferences–Options–Beliefs model, together with social norms theory and Nepal's 2016 national plan, provides a systematic framework to understand and tackle this issue. Meaningful reductions in early marriage need multi-sectoral action together with community engagement and policy enforcement, which supports global goals, including SDG 5.3.



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Recommended Citation: Neupane, S. (2025). From Tradition to Transformation: Ending Child Marriage in Nepal, JHSWN 16(1)