

The Impact of Early Marriage on Health and Education: Challenges and Policy Responses in Rural Nepal

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Publication Date: 2025/06/20

Abstract: This study investigates the intersection of gender, health, and education in the context of early marriage in rural Nepal. Based on comprehensive interviews with 15 participants, the research demonstrates that despite legal prohibitions, early marriage remains prevalent, driven by entrenched socio-cultural beliefs and economic challenges. The findings indicate that early marriage significantly impedes girls' educational attainment, compelling many to withdraw from school by the 11th and 12th grades due to domestic responsibilities and early pregnancies. Health issues, including maternal morbidity, mental health concerns, and restricted access to reproductive services, were frequently reported, corroborating previous research that underscores the detrimental effects of child marriage. Cultural norms, such as beliefs in spiritual blessings and peer pressure, further reinforce the practice of early marriage. Although participants acknowledged the legal minimum age for marriage, enforcement has proven to be inadequate, and support systems are largely absent. The study concludes that comprehensive community-based interventions, which encompass education, health services, legal enforcement, and poverty alleviation, are urgently needed to empower young women, mitigate the adverse effects of early marriage, and promote gender equality in rural Nepal.

Keywords: Early Marriage, Rural Nepal, Girls' Education, Maternal Health, Gender Inequality.

How to Cite: Amba Datt Pant (2025) The Impact of Early Marriage on Health and Education: Challenges and Policy Responses in Rural Nepal. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(6), 1106-1114.
<https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25jun735>

I. INTRODUCTION

➤ Context and Background

Early marriage of girls in rural Nepal is a common social practice, deeply rooted in sociocultural norms and economic hardship. Nearly 37% of girls in Nepal have been married before they turn 18 years old, and the rural belt has witnessed the highest incidence of such marriages due to sociocultural norms and economic conditions (UNFPA, 2020). Early marriage in these regions restricts the access of girls to education and health, which has effects on their future lives and the development of the communities on a large scale. In the majority of rural communities, the patriarchal nature subjects girls to subordinate positions, where early marriage is

considered a means of securing their social and economic welfare at the cost of their personal development and well-being (Bennett & Jha, 2019).

Nepal's cultural background is a significant factor in the persistence of early marriage. Traditional practices and gender norms in the majority of rural societies anticipate girls to be married early, at the age of 15 or 16 years, as per ancient traditions. The practices are sustained by family pressure, social burden, and a lack of awareness about the risks associated with early marriage, including adverse health outcomes of early pregnancy (Sharma & Adhikari, 2018). Acharya and Welsh (2017) found that poverty, illiteracy, and social pressures are the main causes of young marriages

among girls. The majority of the girls in the study region are married between the ages of 10 and 19, with a mean age of 16.5 years. Evidence shows that Nepali adolescent girls have increased maternal death, preterm birth, and delivery complications because there are not enough healthcare facilities in rural settings (Gajalakshmi & Kumar, 2019)

Moreover, Nepal's rural education system faces many challenges, particularly for girls. While legal focus has been placed on gender equality in education, early marriage in most cases leads to the withdrawal of girls from school. Girls only have to stay home doing housework after they get married, and hence cannot get an education. According to Bennett and Jha (2019), dropout rates for girls in rural areas are greater than those for their male equivalents, and early marriage is one of the leading causes of this.

➤ *Legal Context*

While Nepal has enacted a law to ban child marriage and gender equality, implementation and enforcement at the local level remain significant challenges. The Muluki Ain (National Civil Code) 2074 (2018 BS) specifies the minimum legal age of marriage at 20 years for both men and women. Nevertheless, child marriage is prevalent in rural settings, where the law is weakly implemented, and customary traditions tend to override legal protection (Gurung, 2020; Saud, 2024). In a report published in 2018, UNICEF claimed that despite these legislations, child marriage is still being practiced due to deep-rooted cultural beliefs, poverty, and a lack of education in rural regions (UNICEF, 2018).

In 2016, the Child Marriage Prohibition Act was enacted to respond to the rising issue of child marriage by subjecting offenders to legal penalties for marrying or contracting the marriage of children. The legislation is in its implementation held back by limited awareness at the grassroots level, weak legal enforcement systems, and opposition to change at the community level (Gurung, 2020). The lack of gender-sensitive education and community-level advocacy against child marriage in the majority of rural communities contributes to these limitations.

➤ *Cultural Phenomena and Socioeconomic Factors*

Besides legal concerns, socioeconomic conditions also play a part in ensuring the continuation of early marriage among rural Nepal's populace. Poverty continues to remain a driving factor since families of less privileged rural regions tend to marry off daughters at an early age to economize or to get alliances for families. Also, social status is, at times, employed to denote having married daughters, particularly in societies where marrying has been seen as a symbol of social adulthood (Shrestha & Subedi, 2021). Religious beliefs are also employed in such practices where marriage has been seen as a righteous duty, particularly for young women.

Moreover, gender inequality is also at the epicenter of upholding such practices. The cultural stereotype of women as exclusive caregivers and mothers limits their opportunities for self and educational development, thus motherhood and marriage at an early age.

This is reflective of broader patterns of gender violence and discrimination that remain prevalent among most rural women in Nepal (Bhandari et al., 2020)

➤ *Vedic Concept of Marriage*

In Hinduism, marriage is not just a social union, but a religious sacrament or "Samskara". In Vedic traditions, marriage is a ceremony that is intended to bind a man and woman in a union that goes beyond this life and continues to the next life, to continue the family lineage and fulfill dharma (righteousness). The Rigveda and other Vedic texts regard marriage as a sacred bond where the bride and bridegroom exchange vows to fulfill obligations to each other and society (Das, 2019). The Manusmriti, the preeminent treatise on Hindu law, prescribes that girls must be married early in life, often before they have crossed puberty. Early marriage has been believed to bring chastity and the preservation of the girl as well as the spiritual development of the bride and groom (Kane, 2018). Marriage is also viewed as obligatory on the father's part and as such employed as a means for securing his daughters properly married as well as allotted their rightful standing in life.

Furthermore, the Vedic concept of marriage is that a wife's responsibility is to nurture her husband and family, continue the lineage, and uphold the ancestor rituals (Shraddha). This religion, which renders women socially valuable only when they are wives and mothers, has been an early marriage cultural impetus in Nepalese Hindu rural societies (Bhattacharyya, 2020).

➤ *Research Gap*

While much research has been conducted on the educational and health impacts of early marriage in various world settings, relatively less attention has been focused on the particular case of rural Nepal. Existing literature has a partiality to focus either on the health impacts of child marriage, such as maternal mortality and childbearing complications (Sharma et al., 2018), or academic accomplishments, particularly girls' dropout rates at school (Bennett & Jha, 2019). Yet, there are not many studies that have extensively explored how early marriage affects both health and education for young women in rural settings, where the overlap of socioeconomic factors, cultural values, and legal constraints contributes to the magnitude of these impacts. Furthermore, while policy interventions have been implemented to stem child marriage in Nepal, there have been few research studies on the effectiveness of such policies in limiting early marriage and improving the education and health status of married adolescent girls. The gap in literature is especially critical when viewed against rural Nepal since the enforcement of the law is weak and cultural beliefs continue to prevail in the practice of early marriage. Therefore, the current study tries to bridge these gaps by examining how early marriage in rural Nepal impacts the health, education, and socio-economic opportunities of young women and also evaluating the role and effectiveness of current policies and interventions in mitigating these impacts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Health Consequences of Early Marriage in Rural Nepal*

Evidence has consistently indicated the severe health consequences of early marriage in rural Nepal, especially around maternal health and childbirth. Gurung et al. (2020) noted that early pregnancy significantly increases the risk of complications like eclampsia, obstetric fistulae, and postpartum hemorrhage. Adolescent women, particularly in rural dwellings, are at greater risk of maternal mortality compared to mature women due to biological immaturity and limited exposure to high-quality health care (Noori et al., 2022). According to a qualitative study by Howard et al. (2020), teenage mothers were also reported to contract mental illnesses such as depression due to physical side effects of premature pregnancy and peer pressures to succeed in marital and motherhood functions. However, there are shortcomings in knowledge about the long-term psychosocial impacts of early marriage and childbearing, particularly in rural settings where there is less access to mental health services.

➤ *Educational Impacts of Early Marriage*

Early marriage has serious implications for the educational pathway of girls, especially from rural Nepal. It is reported by Samuels and Ghimire (2021) that most girls who get married below the age of 18 years leave school since their duties as wives and mothers surpass that of education. Sekine & Hodgkin (2017) and Dahal et al. (2021) laid the fact that the school dropout rates are much more for married adolescent girls and that their potential future of economic independence and social mobility is hampered by not acquiring formal education. UNICEF (2024) also referred to how social pressure on girls belonging to rural communities to be married results in dropping out of school. Once married, girls are typically expected to focus on household work and childrearing, with no time or resources for further education. However, there is little research to analyze the community-level factors behind the education gap and how family structure influences girls' education prospects after marriage.

➤ *Cultural and Religious Influences on Early Marriage*

Cultural and religious beliefs significantly influence early marriage in Nepal, especially for rural Hindus for whom early marriage is a rite of passage. Seta (2023) cited traditional practices such as the dowry system and the view of marriage as a social obligation as causing the prevalence of early marriages. It is also supported by the belief that a girl's religious and social duty is to marry young and have children, as decreed by religious texts like the Manusmriti (Dhungana, 2021). There has been limited research that has analyzed how religious leaders and village elders challenge or support such cultural beliefs. Detailed qualitative research analyzing how religious doctrine and community expectations influence early marriage decisions and how local leaders can be dissuaded from doing this does not exist.

➤ *Research Problem*

Early marriage among women is a persistent social issue in rural Nepal despite law reforms and increased awareness of the ill consequences of early marriage. Early marriage remains a cultural norm in most rural societies because of extremely deeply entrenched cultural, religious, and socioeconomic

determinants. Early marital practice has significant health, well-being, and educational consequences for young women. While there has been growing global attention to the issue of child marriage, little research has been done that has looked specifically at the intersection of female early marriage, health, and education in rural Nepal.

The health consequences of early marriage are serious, with high maternal death, obstetric complications, and emotional trauma facing adolescent girls. Early marriage also significantly impedes the education of young girls, preventing them from completing school, finding employment, and achieving economic independence. Child marriage is banned in Nepal but continues due to weak enforcement, poverty, and poor access to education and health care in rural Nepal.

➤ *Research Question*

The primary research question is, what are the impacts of female early marriage on education and health among young women in rural Nepal? The research questions supporting this study are as follows:

- What are the obstacles to access to education by young married women at a tender age?
- How are religious and cultural values influencing the practice of early marriage in rural Nepal, and what role do they play in its survival despite legal prohibitions?
- What are the social and economic effects of early female marriage in rural societies, with special reference to gender inequality?

➤ *Justification for the Problem*

The problem of rural Nepali early marriage among girls continues to be a problem due to its wide-ranging effect. It raises health-related problems, such as maternal mortality, risky pregnancy, and mental disturbances, more frequently for adolescent brides. Education is the answer to the empowerment of women. Young married girls, however, often experience major discontinuity of education, shortening their long-term prospects for economic and personal advancement. This study tries to understand the underlying effects of early marriage in the life of women, specifically in rural Nepal, where the practice persists even after legal and social efforts to eliminate it. From a health and education perspective, this study tries to shed some light on how these aspects are linked to each other and add up to the general socio-economic standing of young women in rural areas.

➤ *Aim of the Study*

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of early marriage on the health, education, and socio-economic status of rural Nepalese girls and to value the cultural, social, and policy-related reasons for its persistence.

➤ *Specific Objectives*

- To explore the health implications of early marriage for young women in rural Nepal, focusing on maternal health, emotional trauma, and psychological well-being.
- To examine the barriers that limit access to education for young women who marry early, and to understand the long-term effects on their educational outcomes.
- To investigate the cultural, social, and economic factors that perpetuate early marriage in rural Nepal, and to assess

the effectiveness of existing legal and policy measures in addressing the issue.

➤ Conceptual Framework

This conceptual model on the impact of early marriage recognizes how such issues as socioeconomic pressures, gender inequality, and cultural norms lead to early marriage,

which has adverse effects on girls' education and health. The model recognizes significant health implications, such as maternal risks and psychological issues, and educational impacts like school dropout and limited career development. It also calls for policy interventions such as legal reform, education, and health, to reduce their impact and save young girls.

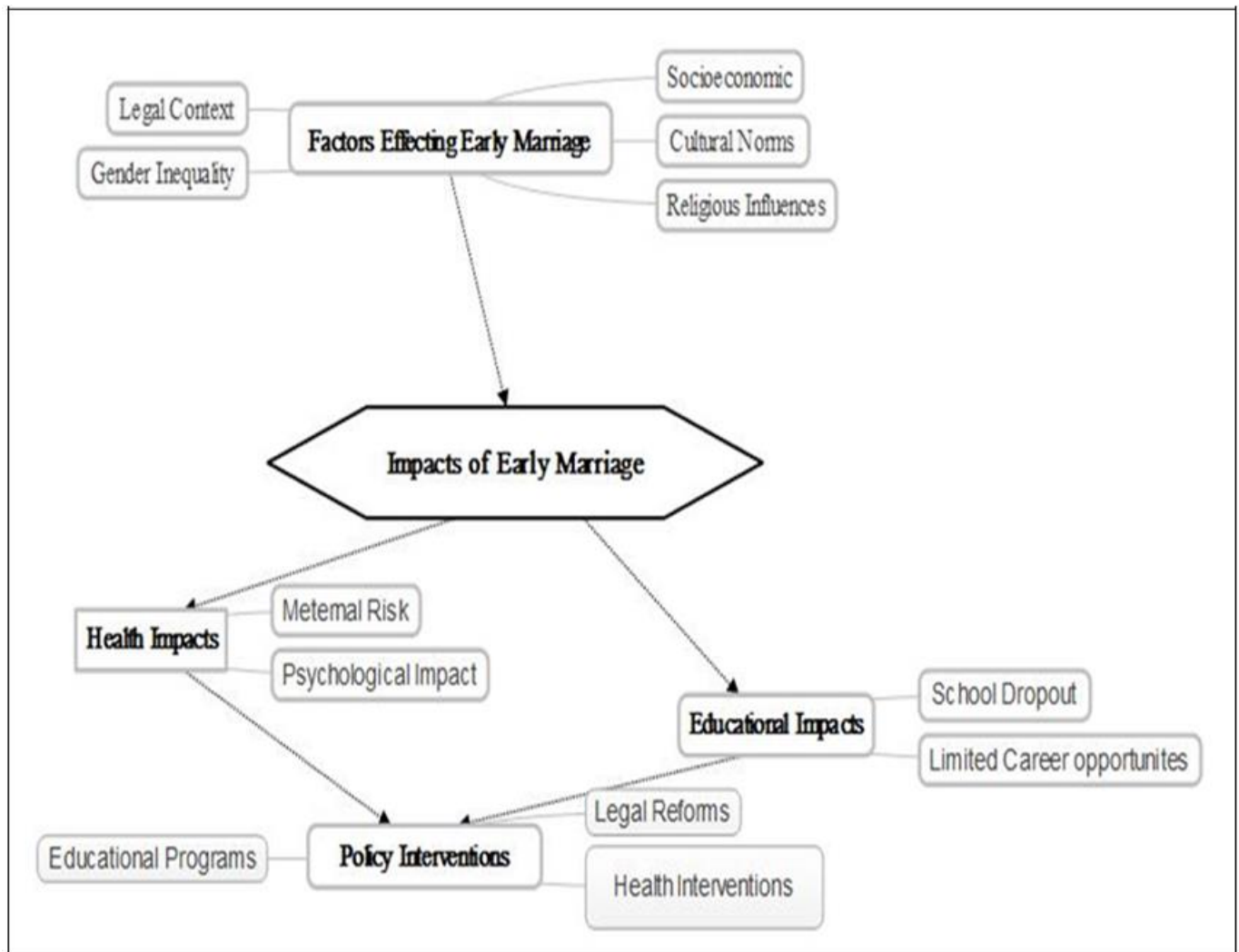


Fig 1 Conceptual Framework

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ Research Paradigm

The research paradigm of constructivism and interpretivism is employed in this study, which are highly suitable to reveal the subjective and personal experiences of early marriage of women in rural Nepal. Constructivism suggests that people create their knowledge of the world based on interactions and experiences (Saleem et al., 2021). Hence, constructivism is highly suitable to understand how young women who marry at an early age view the impact of early marriage on their health and education. Interpretivism is concerned with how people interpret their own lives and the meaning they attach to their experiences, which is also the objective of this research to examine how these women interpret the effects of early marriage in their social and cultural context (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Both paradigms

emphasize that people's realities are built within their social and cultural contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 2013). Through the use of these frameworks, this study will closely look at underage married women's narratives and experiences, providing deep insights into the intersection of gender, health, and education in rural Nepal.

➤ Ontology and Epistemology

This study assumes a constructivist ontology, which assumes reality to be socially constructed and subjective and is shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors (Packer & Goicoechea, 2010). Rather than a single objective reality, the research recognizes that participants experience multiple realities based on their respective perspectives. The epistemological stance is interpretivism, noting that knowledge is co-constructed from social interactions between the researcher and the participants (Bhattarai, 2021). The

strategy focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of what occurs to them within their respective socio-cultural context, thus allowing for scrutiny of the lived experiences of women subjected to early marriage. Through carrying out semi-structured interviews, the researcher anticipates gaining rich knowledge on how early marriage influences health and education from the viewpoints of the participants themselves.

➤ *Method*

The qualitative approach is adopted in this research, as it is primarily aiming to study the lived experiences of young women who married under the age of majority in rural Nepal. Qualitative approaches are well-suited for studying personal histories, beliefs, and experiences, as they provide the researcher an opportunity to become familiar with the ways people give meaning to their lives and contend with complex social phenomena (Patton, 2015). By focusing on the subjective experiences of underage married women, the research tries to get close to how they see their own health, education, and social relations in rural Nepalese society.

➤ *Research Design*

This study utilizes a phenomenological research design, which is suitable for examining the lived experiences of women who were married under the age of majority in rural Nepal. Phenomenology is interested in understanding how individuals experience and understand their lived experiences and attempts to discover the meaning of such experiences from the participants' perspectives (Neubauer et al., 2019). Researching the influence of early marriage on education and health offers an in-depth examination of personal accounts and narratives, providing a rich insight into the phenomenon within social, cultural, and emotional contexts (Nhampoca & Mritz, 2024). Phenomenology is most appropriate for this study because it describes human meaning-making processes and enables the researcher to enter the events themselves and see how these women experience and navigate the consequences of early marriage in their lives.

➤ *Data Collection Method*

The primary data-gathering method of this study would be semi-structured interviews, a standard qualitative approach that works particularly well for accessing the day-to-day living experiences of individuals (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The method allows the researcher to follow the interview from a pre-existing list of inquiries while also offering the researcher room to adjust the conversation based on the participants' responses. This approach is most appropriate to achieve deeper insight into the perceptions of the participants about early marriage, health, and education (Morgan et al., 2013). Semi-structured interviews provide the participants with the opportunity to offer elaborate descriptions of their experience and produce rich and detailed data capable of eliciting the complex social and emotional dimensions of early marriage. By allowing participants the autonomy to be themselves and express themselves freely, this method enables a deeper understanding of the social and individual implications of early marriage.

➤ *Tools*

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the semi-structured interviews. The interview schedule was composed of questions designed to explore the following themes:

- The circumstances of the early marriage of the participants
- The impact of early marriage on their education and future aspirations
- Health issues and consequences associated with early marriage
- Social, family, and cultural determinants that influence early marriage decisions

The interview schedule was designed in a culturally sensitive manner so that questions were asked respectfully and appropriately in the local context.

➤ *Participants*

The participants were 15 underage marriage women from rural families in Far Western Nepal's Dadeldhura District who have been married at an early age, according to Nepali law (below 20 years of age for women). These women were selected because they are direct representatives of the targeted population that is the farthest affected by early marriage in rural Nepal. The sample size is considered adequate to bring aboard a diversity of opinions without going overboard with the qualitative examination (Sarfo et al., 2021).

➤ *Research Area*

The study took place in Nepal's Far Western Province in Dadeldhura District, which is a rural village. There is a high rate of child marriage in this location, making it a perfect site to realize the intersectionality of early marriage, education, and health within the rural setup. The field location was tactically chosen to ensnare socio-economic and socio-cultural forces molding early marriage processes within rural Nepal.

➤ *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical considerations play a crucial role in this study, prioritizing the protection and well-being of participants. Informed consent was secured, and participants received comprehensive information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used, ensuring anonymity. Participants' dignity will be upheld when addressing sensitive subjects such as marriage and health. These ethical practices are in line with established guidelines (Creswell, 2014), ensuring that participation is voluntary, informed, and ethically responsible.

➤ *Accuracy, Credibility, and Trustworthiness*

In this research, several measures were implemented to ensure the accuracy, credibility, trustworthiness, and quality of the collected data. Triangulation was used to confirm findings through multiple data collection methods, such as alternating between interviews and document analysis. Additionally, member checking allowed participants to review and validate the interviews, ensuring that the provided explanations accurately reflected their experiences (Cope, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

➤ *Data Analysis Method*

After gathering the necessary information, qualitative data analysis will also be carried out in a regular pattern constructed on the thematic analysis technique (Lochmiller, 2021). It will address enormous issues about the effect of early marriage on health protection and education value; at the same time, it will inform the researchers by impressions and meaning drawn by the participants from two aspects. Such heavy issues are discussed by the thematic analysis process concerning the health and educational influences of early marriage; at the same time, this will also be informative to the researchers by impressions and meanings drawn by the participants from these two aspects.

➤ *Limitations*

The study has some limitations that need to be recognized. Firstly, the concern about the representativeness of all rural areas in Nepal is based on a small sample of fifteen participants. Still, these results may indicate the experience of the early-marriage groups affected. Secondly, the researcher being new in the field might bring an element of social desirability bias or power dynamic, thus affecting the respondents' responses. Lastly, although the interviews were conducted in Nepalese, these do not add to the misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the responses of the participants since a native researcher carried out the work.

➤ *Impact Statement*

It is a significant study whose findings are highly informative about gender, health, and education in rural Nepal, while the study findings can be especially important when it comes to the consequences of early marriage, informing policy and interventions related to the reduction of early marriage, improvement of girls' educational access, and addressing the health needs of married adolescents within rural communities. It may be significant to the broader discourses regarding gender equity and young girls' rights in South Asia.

IV. FINDING

This study's results have provided critical insights into how gender, health, and education interact in rural Nepal, particularly regarding the effects of child marriage. The research could be useful for policy and interventions meant to reverse early marriage trends, improve girls' access to Education, and address the health needs of married adolescents in rural areas. The impacts of this research could shape high-level debates on gender parity and the rights of young girls across South Asia. These findings are as follows:

➤ *Demographic Profile of Early Marriages*

The socio-demographic backgrounds of the respondents in rural Nepal reveal much about the socio-cultural dynamics of early marriage. Even though marriage below the age of 20 has been legally prohibited, a vast majority of individuals, particularly in rural Nepal, continue to practice early marriage, primarily due to entrenched socio-economic reasons. The continuity of the practice despite legal prohibition is indicative of the need for interventions that address the causative determinants of child marriage. Wagle and Acharya (2024) found that 90% of the respondents got married before they reached 20 years, 14.3% got married before 14, and 65.7% got

married at 15 to 17 years of age. For educational attainment, participants had either studied at the secondary level (grades 11-12) or had stopped studying due to early marriage. This indicates the complex interaction between education and early marriage. Early marriage is the main cause of school dropout and poor educational outcomes, especially for girls (Raj et al., 2019). The participants said that their professions have not yielded good returns. Although they have adopted some occupations to earn a living, their financial situation has deteriorated due to their inability to devote time to their profession because of early marriage. Gelchu Adola and Wirth (2024) found that early marriage hinders education and occupational opportunities.

➤ *Health Implications of Early Marriage*

In the rural areas of Nepal, early marriage significantly impacts the health and well-being of women. The study found that participants reported numerous health-related problems and challenges associated with early marriage. They indicated facing difficulties during their pregnancies, such as physical weakness, back pain, mental health issues, postpartum hemorrhage, and cesarean deliveries. These findings align with Paudel (2024), who found that early marriage often results in increased maternal and child mortalities, malnutrition, uterine prolapse, and mental health issues in young brides and their children. A study conducted by Maharjan et al. (2019) discovered that underage married girls encounter obstacles in accessing reproductive health services, including overwork, limited autonomy, and transportation challenges. These issues heighten the risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth. Additionally, participants highlighted the poor maternal facilities in rural and remote areas. The research identified long travel distances to healthcare centers, inadequate road conditions, and a lack of transportation as the major barriers to accessing skilled birth care in remote Nepali communities (Shrestha et al., 2014). The socio-cultural practices and social values that may discourage seeking healthcare services further complicate these challenges.

Implementing community-based interventions, providing reproductive health education, establishing accessible health services, and promoting supportive policies can reduce child marriage-related health impacts and improve the overall well-being of young women in rural Nepal.

➤ *Education and Access to Learning*

Findings from this study, which included interviews with 15 participants, highlight the pervasive impact of early marriage on girls' educational attainment and access to learning opportunities. Among these participants, most reported being forced to discontinue their studies after marriage, with some stopping in class 11 and others in class 12. The experiences of three participants illustrate key themes reported by the broader group. One participant described how early marriage led to immediate childbearing responsibilities and domestic workloads that prevented her from continuing her studies, explaining that the "negative thinking of family and burden of a child include domestic workload" (Participant 1). Another participant emphasized how financial hardship and lack of spousal support ("unhelpful behavior of my husband and financial problems") compounded the challenges

she faced, ultimately obstructing her efforts to continue her education (Participant 2). Another participant noted that her family “did not give priority to education after my marriage,” highlighting how family attitudes further hindered access to learning. These experiences echo a broader pattern reported across the 15 participants, who consistently identified family tensions, economic hardship, and societal pressures as major obstacles to education after early marriage. Participants overwhelmingly expressed that education is a transformative tool that can change lives; yet, early marriage closes off educational, economic, and employment opportunities, continuing cycles of poverty and gender inequality. As one participant aptly concluded, “Without education, life itself becomes dark” (Participant 3). These findings underscore the urgent need to address early marriage as a barrier to education and to implement policies and community-based interventions that support girls’ right to learn.

➤ *Cultural, Social, and Economic Factors*

The study reveals that cultural, social, and economic factors strongly influence the persistence of early marriage in rural communities. Early marriage is often regarded as a sacred duty or a means of spiritual fulfillment, with parents believing it brings blessings and good fortune. In some communities, marrying a girl before her first menstruation is considered a way to secure spiritual merit. Additionally, social norms and peer influences sustain early marriage practices, as it is widely accepted and normalized within these communities. Traditional beliefs, such as the notion that having a grandchild before death ensures spiritual rewards, further encourage early marriage. Economic hardships also drive this practice, as parents view marriage as a way to relieve financial burdens by transferring responsibility for daughters to their husbands’ families. As a result, early marriage severely limits economic opportunities for young women, limiting their ability to pursue education or employment and exacerbating poverty. These findings underscore the interconnectedness of cultural beliefs, social norms, and economic pressures in preserving early marriage, highlighting the urgent need for community education, poverty alleviation, and policy interventions.

➤ *Legal and Policy Aspects*

The findings indicate that while participants are aware of the legal provisions that prohibit marriage before the age of 20 in Nepal, these laws are often inadequately enforced, particularly in rural areas where child marriage persists both openly and secretly. Elopement marriages are also noted as a contributing factor to early marriage in these communities. Participants emphasized that, although legal frameworks are present, they are insufficient to prevent early marriage due to a lack of awareness, enforcement, and support mechanisms. Many reported that neither governmental nor non-governmental organizations provide meaningful assistance to those affected by early marriage. There is a perceived gap between policy and practice, with participants highlighting the absence of effective, female-friendly interventions to support victims. They suggested that training, education, employment opportunities, and public awareness initiatives are essential to empower young girls and their families to resist early marriage. Additionally, participants expressed that parents should be more vigilant about the risks associated with early

marriage and prioritize their daughters’ education as a means of prevention. Overall, the findings suggest that legal provisions alone are insufficient and must be complemented by robust implementation, community-based interventions, and targeted support for affected girls and their families.

V. DISCUSSION

This research found that early marriage in rural communities of western Nepal regularly hampers girls’ education, overall health conditions, and employment opportunities despite legal exclusions. Participants reported that they dropped out of their studies during classes 11 and 12 because of home-related burdens due to marriage and early pregnancies, findings are not in contrast to Raj et al. (2019) and Chandel et al. (2024), who found early marriage as the main factor in female school dropout and hinders educational opportunities for girls, resulting in lower educational attainment and restricted access to jobs. Health outcomes were also negatively affected. Participants reported physical weakness, poor mental health, complications during pregnancies, and severe child health issues among underage brides. Similar challenges were reported by Maharjan et al. (2019), Paudel (2019), and Shrestha et al. (2014). Early marriage in rural communities of Nepal is often nourished by social and cultural factors, as well as economic factors. Participants expressed their views of early marriage taken as holy work in their societies. They explained parents believed that marrying girls before their first menstruation brings blessings. In rural areas, early marriage is influenced by several factors, including socioeconomic status, gender discrimination, caste, geography, poverty, unemployment, an uneducated family, migration, and love affairs, as noted by Bhattarai et al. (2022). In the context of Nepal, participants were familiar with a legal minimum age of marriage but they said the rule is not affected properly and victims were not supported. Legal frameworks are insufficient without effective implementation, community engagement, and support programs (Maharjan et al., 2019; Paudel, 2024). Participants suggested comprehensive interventions e.g., girls’ education, opportunities for employment, and community awareness to empower girls and control early marriage.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research highlights that early marriage in rural western Nepal undermines girls’ education, health, and economic opportunities, despite legal prohibitions. Inherent cultural beliefs, socio-economic constraints, and ineffective policy enforcement sustain this practice. Comprehensive, community-based interventions including education, awareness, and support are urgently needed to empower girls and break the cycle of child marriage, fostering healthier and more equitable futures.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author expresses heartfelt gratitude to all the women participants who generously shared their experiences and insights. Special thanks go to the local community leaders and volunteers who facilitated the interviews. The author also

acknowledges the support and guidance provided by academic mentors and colleagues throughout the research process.

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