

Prevalence of Early Marriage and its Concomitant Factors Among Married Women of Raskot, Kalikot, Nepal: A Community Led Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Early marriage is a public health issue caused by many interconnected factors. It has been a problem in Nepal for many years and differs across districts, as well as among various ethnic and religious groups. The aim of the study was to determine the prevalence of early marriage and explore its accompanying factors among the women of Raskot, Kalikot, Nepal.

Methods: It was a descriptive cross-sectional study conducted among the married women of Raskot, Kalikot, from November 2023 to January 2024, after obtaining ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Committee of Karnali Academy of Health Sciences (IRC-KAHS) (Ref:079/080/19). A face-to-face interview was conducted with the participants selected by using the cluster random sampling, and descriptive information on participants' age, ethnicity, educational level, occupation, and marital status was collected.

Results: A total of 200 married women participated, with a mean age of 34.89 years. Of the total participants, 69.5% reported getting married before the age of 18 years. A significant portion (71.5%) were aware of early marriage consequences, including abortion, maternal mortality, and high fertility rates. Key causes included illiteracy (69%) and peer influence (56.5%). Most participants (89.5%) were engaged in agriculture, and 79.6% did not continue education after marriage. Awareness of appropriate marriage age was high (92.5%).

Conclusion: Although early marriage is decreasing in the Kalikot district, many still marry before the age of 18, the trend indicating that the lack of awareness about the appropriate age for marriage might not be the main reason behind the practice.

Keywords: early marriage; prevalence; Raskot

Introduction

Marriage, traditionally defined as a formal and legal relationship between two individuals of opposite genders, serves social, biological, psychological, and religious purposes.¹ While its concept has evolved over time, "early marriage" remains a significant concern, referring to unions occurring before the age of 18 years.² This practice is prevalent in many Asian and African countries, including

Nepal, where it is deeply rooted in traditions, rituals, and socioeconomic conditions.³

In Nepal, early marriage is often linked to poverty, limited education, and the belief that marrying a girl early ensures a happy married life. However, it has severe consequences, including adverse reproductive outcomes, lack of contraception access, malnutrition, school

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dropouts, and vulnerability to violence. Uterine prolapse is one of the most common health issues associated with early marriage.^{3,4} The prevalence of child marriage varies significantly across ethnic, caste, and religious groups, with marginalized communities such as Janajati and Dalits being disproportionately affected.^{5,6} Despite a legal minimum marriage age of 20 years in Nepal, UNICEF (2019) reported that 37% of girls were married before 18 years, and 8% of women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 15 years.⁷

Early marriage remains a persistent public health issue in Nepal, driven by various factors that negatively impact individuals in multiple domains. However, gaps still exist in understanding regional disparities, community beliefs, and awareness of the legal marriage age. This study aims to address these gaps by determining the prevalence of early marriage and exploring its various accompanying factors among the married women in Raskot municipality of Kalikot, Nepal.

Methods

This descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted among married women residing in Raskot Municipality, Kalikot District, Nepal, a rural area characterized by a relatively high rate of early marriage. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Committee of Karnali Academy of Health Sciences (IRC-KAHS; Ref. No: 079/080/19). Data collection occurred over a three-month period, from November 2023 to January 2024, and included descriptive information on participants' age, ethnicity, educational level, occupation, and marital status.

A cluster random sampling technique was employed to select participants. The study focused on Raskot Municipality, which consists of nine wards. Three wards (Ward 1, Ward 2, and Ward 9) were randomly chosen using a lottery method. These wards were further categorized into three ethnic clusters: Brahmin, Chhetri, and Dalit. From each cluster, 25 households with a married woman were selected for participation, and the interviews were conducted in the homes of these participants.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a pretested, semi-structured, valid questionnaire. The minimum required sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, with an estimated prevalence of early marriage of 52%.^{8,9} After adjusting for the finite population of 2187, the sample size was calculated to be 196. Considering the finite population correction, the final required sample size was rounded up to 200 participants.

Data entry was performed using Epi-Data 3.1 software, and statistical analysis was conducted in SPSS Version 16, wherein frequency and percentage analysis for the descriptive data was performed.

Results

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants. (n=200)

S.N.	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)			
1	15-25	30	15.0
2	25-35	79	39.5
3	35-45	71	35.5
4	More than 45	20	10.0
Ethnicity			
1	Brahmin	66	33.0
2	Chhetri	68	34.0
3	Dalit	66	33.0
Literacy Status			
1	Literate	107	53.5
2	Illiterate	93	46.5
Education Level			
1	Basic Education (1-8 class)	36	34.0
2	Secondary (9-12 class)	67	63.2
3	Bachelor and above	3	2.8
Occupation Status			
1	Agriculture	179	89.5
2	Business	12	6.0
3	Job	2	1.0
4	House maker	3	1.5
5	Student	1	0.5
Marital Status			
1	Married	196	98.0
2	Separated	1	0.5
3	Widow	3	1.5

Table 1 presents the descriptive characteristics of the 200 study participants. The mean age of the participants was 34.89 years, with ages ranging from a minimum of 18 to a maximum of 59 years. All participants identified as adherents of the Hindu religion. Ethnically, 68 participants (34% of the total) belonged to the Chhetri caste. Regarding educational status, 53.5% of the participants were literate, having received formal schooling and being able to read and write, while 46.5% were illiterate. In terms of occupation,

the majority (89.5%) were engaged in agriculture as their primary livelihood. Smaller percentages were involved in business (6%), institutional jobs (1%), housework or home management (1.5%), and student activities (0.5%). As for marital status, the vast majority (98%) of participants were married, 0.5% were separated, and 1.5% were widows.

Table 2: Distribution of the study participants based on their reported marriage-related characteristics

S.N.	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age during marriage (Years)			
1	11-14	4	2.0
2	15-18	135	67.5
3	19-24	58	29.0
4	≥25	3	1.5
Types of marriage			
1	Love Marriage	62	31.0
2	Arrange Marriage	77	38.5
3	Elope Marriage	61	30.5
Decision for Marriage			
1	Father	7	3.5
2	Mother	1	.5
3	Both father and mother	72	36.0
4	Grandfather/Grandmother	1	0.5
5	By own	119	59.5
Age gap between husband and wife (years)			
1	2 and less year	79	43.6
2	More than 2 years	102	56.4
Age during 1st child			
1	15-19	90	46.9
2	20-24	97	50.5
3	More than 25	5	2.6
Polygamy			
1	Yes	4	2.0
2	No	196	98.0
Continuation of study after marriage			
1	Yes	23	20.4
2	No	90	79.6
Perception about suitable age of marriage			
1	Before 20 years	15	7.5
2	20 or more years	185	92.5

Table 2 illustrates various aspects of the participants'

marriage experiences. Among the participants, 69.5% were less than 18 years old at the time of their marriage. In terms of consent, 38.5% of the marriages were conducted with formal parental consent, 31.0% with the individual's own consent, and 30.5% involved elopement against the wishes of their families and community values. Regarding the age gap between spouses, 56.4% of participants reported an age difference of more than two years with their husbands. In terms of childbearing, 50.5% of participants had their first child between the ages of 20 and 24. Furthermore, 79.6% of participants did not continue their education after marriage, while 92.5% were aware of the appropriate age for women to marry.

Table 3: Participants' knowledge on the various marriage related characteristics

S.N.	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Knowledge about consequences of early marriage			
1	Yes	143	71.5 %
2	No	57	28.5%
Various consequences of early marriage (multiple responses)			
1	High fertility rate	59	41.3%
2	Abortion/ miscarriage	82	57.3%
3	Maternal Mortality	69	48.3%
4	Neonatal Mortality	41	28.7%
5	Children born with congenital anomalies	24	16.8%
6	Malnutrition	68	47.6%
7	Low birth weight baby	39	27.3%
8	Others	49	34.3%
Causes of early marriage (multiple responses)			
1	Illiteracy	138	69.0%
2	Gender inequality	67	33.5%
3	Unemployment	47	23.5%
4	Misuse of mobile and social media	67	33.5%
5	Quarrel in house	31	15.5%
6	Peer influences	113	56.5%
7	Dropout from school	15	7.5%
8	Family problems	39	19.5%
9	Love relation	34	17.0%
10	Others	16	8.0%

The study also assessed participants' knowledge of the consequences and causes of early marriage. A large majority (71.5%) of the participants were aware of the consequences of early marriage, while 28.5% were not. The most commonly recognized consequences of early marriage included abortion or miscarriage (57.3%), maternal mortality (48.3%), high fertility rate (41.3%), malnutrition (47.6%), and neonatal mortality (28.7%). Other consequences mentioned included low birth weight babies (27.3%), congenital anomalies in children (16.8%), and various unspecified outcomes (34.3%). In terms of the causes of early marriage, illiteracy was the most frequently cited factor (69.0%), followed by peer influences (56.5%), gender inequality (33.5%), and misuse of mobile and social media (33.5%). Additional causes identified included unemployment (23.5%), family problems (19.5%), quarrels within the household (15.5%), love relationships (17.0%), school dropout (7.5%), and other unspecified factors (8.0%). These findings underscore the participants' awareness of the detrimental effects of early marriage and highlight the role of illiteracy and social influences in its prevalence.

Discussion

Early marriage is a global public health concern influenced by a complex web of factors. The prevalence of early marriage is most common among women in the ≤18 years age group, those who are illiterate or have only basic literacy, and Janajati ethnic groups. Sociodemographic factors such as age, sex, caste/ethnicity, family economic status, and educational status play a significant role in the occurrence of early marriage.

Out of the 200 respondents, all identified as Hindus and belonged to the Brahmin (33%), Chhetri (34%), and Dalit (33%) ethnic groups. The majority of respondents' families (89.5%) depended on agriculture as their primary source of livelihood. Regarding the type of marriage, 38.5% of women experienced early marriage through arranged marriages, 31% through love marriages, and 30.5% through elopements. The study conducted by Manandar et al. reported that the majority of mothers were farmers (198, 55.3%), followed by those in business (76, 21.2%) and homemakers (56, 15.6%).¹⁰ Similar findings were observed in a study conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, which found that early marriage was less common among women who were employed compared to those who were not.¹¹

In this study, the overall prevalence of early marriage, as reported by the study participants, was found to be 69.5%, which is comparable to the finding of the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey, 2016.⁹ Similarly, early marriage was found to be more prevalent among the Dalit caste (45.5%) compared to the Chhetri (33.8%) and Brahmin (27.3%) caste groups. Analysis of the 2006 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey reports the variation of child marriage rates across Nepal's diverse ethnic, religious, and caste groups with this issue being the most common among illiterate women, and those from marginalized, Janajati, and Dalit communities in Nepal.⁶ Similarly, the study by Manandar et al. reported that 104 (55.6%) of illiterate women experienced early marriage,

and illiterate women had 4.69 times higher odds of early marriage. The educational status of women was identified as a significant factor influencing the occurrence of early marriage.¹⁰ A report by United Nations Population Fund highlights the higher incidence of early marriage among individuals with a positive attitude towards early marriage (75%), compared to those with a negative attitude (39%).¹²

In this study, it was found that parental decision-making played an important role in their children's marital decisions, with 59.7% of participants reporting that their parents were the primary decision-makers. Similarly, a study conducted by Maharjan et al. under the Save the Children (Child Rights Resource Center) highlighted that in societies where parents hold significant influence over marital decisions, girls are expected to marry at an age determined by their parents.¹³

This study relied on self-reported data, which may introduce recall or social desirability biases, especially regarding sensitive topics such as early marriage and its consequences. It used a cross-sectional design, which prevents the establishment of causal relationships between variables like education, socioeconomic status, and early marriage. Additionally, the study was conducted in a single municipality, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions of Nepal or different cultural contexts. These factors should be considered when interpreting the results.

To combat early marriage in this study area and other disadvantaged parts of Nepal, it is essential to provide quality education to all children, particularly girls. Additionally, policies promoting gender equality and equity, along with strict regulations against child marriage, are necessary to address this issue effectively.

Conclusion

This study highlights the high prevalence of early marriage, particularly among illiterate women and those from marginalized ethnic groups. Parental influence and limited education were identified as significant factors contributing to early marriage. To address this issue, it is crucial to promote quality education, gender equality, and stricter policies against early marriage, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Future research should explore the effectiveness of educational interventions and community-based awareness programs in reducing early marriage rates and improving long-term outcomes for young women.

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