

Early-Age Self-Initiated Marriage of Girls in Nepal



Research Report



Janaki Women Awareness Society

<https://jwas.org.np/>

Disclaimer

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President's Foreword

Janaki Women Awareness Society (JWAS) is a women-led non-governmental organization established in 1993 by local women activists and social workers. Registered with the Government of Nepal, JWAS works to empower marginalized communities, particularly women and girls, through civic engagement, advocacy, education, community mobilization, dialogue, and research.

On behalf of JWAS, I extend my sincere gratitude to DKA Austria for generously funding this research. I am deeply thankful to all research informants for sharing their valuable experiences and insights, including young women in self-initiated marriages, unmarried young women, provincial and national stakeholders, and members of Girls Not Brides Nepal.

I also acknowledge the invaluable contributions of partner organizations, reviewers, and individual experts who supported this study at different stages. The dedication of the research team, including Principal Researcher, Mr. Nub Raj Bhandari, who is also a Program Director and researcher at JWAS, and other researchers, along with the JWAS senior officials, was instrumental in bringing this report to its present stage.

I believe this research strengthens the efforts to end child marriage in Nepal and globally. It also contributes to achieving JWAS's vision of building a prosperous society where women can live with dignity.

Manda Kumari Karna

President, JWAS

December, 2025

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Explanations

Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership- *Girls Not Brides* is a global network of more than 1,400 civil society organizations from nearly 100 countries committed to ending child marriage and ensuring girls can reach their full potential. For more information:

<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-us/>

Girls Not Brides Nepal- *Girls Not Brides Nepal* (*Balika Dulahi Hoinan* in Nepali) was created in February 2012 and became an official *Girls Not Brides* National Partnership in February 2015. More information: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/our-partnership/national-partnerships-coalitions/nepal/>

Stakeholders- In this study, teachers, parents, religious leaders, journalists, civil society leaders, and researchers are mentioned as stakeholders.

Major Highlights

- Adolescents' decisions regarding early-age self-initiated marriages are influenced by many factors including family, friends, culture, poverty, social media, and gender norms. These factors combine in multifaceted ways that shape when and how young girls decide to marry.
- Friends' influence remains at the center. Young girls often follow what their friends do. If friends are married or involved in romantic relationships, they are more likely to do the same.
- Love, emotions, and sentimental pressures are strong drivers. Expressions of long-lasting love by boyfriends, emotional attachments, fear of losing a partner, or threats from boys can make adolescents feel they have no alternatives other than marrying at an early age.
- Social media and public gatherings help initiate and strengthen relationships. Digital spaces such as mobile phones, Facebook, and TikTok, as well as public gatherings such as festivals, fairs, night shows, and other public spaces make it easier for girls and boys to meet, communicate, and initiate romantic connections.
- The desire to live a modern life amid entrenched poverty creates additional risks. Exposure to cities, tourism, migration, and modern lifestyles provides adolescents with more opportunities to meet partners and decide to marry at an early age.
- All informants stated that the minimum age for marriage should be 20 or older. They highlighted that delaying marriage allows adolescent girls to complete their education, gain independence, earn, and make informed decisions regarding their life partners.

Table of Contents

Major Highlights	iv
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Background and Significance of Child Marriage Study in Nepal.....	2
Rationale of the Study	3
Research Aims and Questions.....	3
Literature Review	3
Child Marriage in Nepal.....	3
Differences in Marriage Types.....	4
Increasing Trend of Self-Initiated Marriages	5
Drivers of Child Marriage in Nepal	6
Religious and Historical Narratives of Self-Initiated Marriages.....	7
Shifts in Interpretation Over Time	7
Gaps in Existing Literature	8
Methodology	8
Findings.....	11
Peer Influence and Romantic Motivations	11
Expanded Friendship Circles.....	13
Influence of Digital Technologies: Social Media and Smartphones.....	13
Cultural Events and Public Spaces	14
Emotional and Sentimental Pressures	15
Migration and Modernity	16
Socio-Economic and Cultural Influences.....	17
Gender Norms and Social Constraints	19
Family and Community Reactions	19
Consequences of Early-Age Self-Initiated Marriage	20
Views on Reducing Early-Age Self-Initiated Marriage.....	22
Perceptions on the Minimum Age to Marry.....	22
Discussion.....	23
Conclusion	25
Recommendation.....	26
References.....	27
Annex 1: Flowchart of Research Methodology	31
Annex 2: More Information on Selection of Province	31
Annex 3: Collaboration and Research Management.....	32

Tables

Table 1: Prevalence of child marriage by province (% of ever-married women)	5
Table 2: Age Profile of Married Women and Unmarried Girls.....	11
Table 3: Composite Scoring of Provinces for Selection.....	32
Figure 1: Flowchart of Research Methodology	31

Executive Summary

This study explores the increasing trend of early-age self-initiated marriages among adolescent girls in Nepal, which is one of the underexplored areas within the framework of child marriage. Unlike arranged marriages, which are largely forced and family-driven, in self-initiated marriages, girls make decisions based on romantic relationships, desire for autonomy, and escape from social and family restrictions. Such marriages reflect personal choice but also expose girls to risks, including educational disturbances, early pregnancy and parenthood, and long-term socio-economic vulnerability.

The research aims to explore the motivations, underlying causes, consequences, and changing modern contexts that influence early-age self-initiated marriages. A qualitative exploratory design captured the experiences of informants across four provinces namely Far-Western¹, Lumbini, Madhesh, and Koshi.

Provinces were chosen purposively based on child marriage prevalence before age 18 years and the female population aged between 20 and 29. As the primary informants, a total of 60 interviews with key informants were conducted with women who married before 20 and were between 20 and 29 at the time of the interview, unmarried young women, and key stakeholders such as teachers, parents, religious leaders, journalists, researchers, and civil society representatives.

Findings reveal that peer influence, romantic and emotional pressures, social media, and mobile phones play critical roles in shaping adolescent decisions. Socio-economic and cultural factors, such as poverty and entrenched gender norms, further drive individual motivations. Similarly, migration and urban exposure provide additional pathways toward early-age self-initiated marriages.

Family and community reactions were often uncertain and contrasting, with initial opposition and eventual acceptance. Informants emphasized the importance of open communication with parents, continued education, and skills development as key strategies to support adolescents' well-being. Informants stated that the minimum age for marriage should be at least 20 or older. Delaying marriage allows adolescent girls to complete their education, gain independence, earn, and make informed decisions regarding their life partners.

The study highlights the importance of interventions at multiple levels. Community-based initiatives can engage families and peers to create safe and supportive environments. Digital literacy programs for both parents and adolescents are needed to reduce the risks associated with social media and mobile phones.

Further research areas are recommended to inform policies and effective interventions, including similar research from the perspectives of boys and men; understanding the nexus between climate change and child marriage; and formative research that addresses structural challenges such as poverty, dowry, and parental fear that indirectly support early-age self-initiated marriage.

¹ Far-Western is the English translation of Nepali name "Sudurpaschim".

Introduction

Child marriage is a harmful practice that disrupts girls' lives, prematurely imposing adult responsibilities that can adversely impact their physical, emotional, and economic well-being (Rijal et al., 2025). Child marriage is a violation of human rights, and marriage before adulthood is a breach of children's rights as well (United Nations Children's Fund Regional Office for South Asia [UNICEF-ROSA], 2023). It is prevalent in Nepal historically (Women's Rehabilitation Center [WOREC] Nepal, 2021).

While the definition includes child, early and forced marriages and unions, the majority of research has focused on arranged or forced marriages. Less attention has been given to the emerging trend of self-initiated marriages. This study explores the increasing trend of self-initiated marriages among girls who marry at an early age in Nepal, focusing on their motivations, underlying causes, and consequences.

In this study, the term "early marriage" is used to refer to marriages that occur before the age of 20. This definition aligns with Nepali law regarding the legal age of marriage. This research uses the terms "early marriage" and "child marriage" interchangeably. Likewise, to refer to girls under the age of 20, the study uses terms such as "young girls," "underage girls," "early-age girls," and "girl child" interchangeably.

Background and Significance of Child Marriage Study in Nepal

In Nepal, child marriage legally refers to a union where one or both partners are below the age of 20 (Government of Nepal, 2018). Nepali society is highly influenced by patriarchal norms, with parental control strongly influencing marital decisions. Research conducted by Plan Nepal et al. (2012) shows that 60.4% of marriages are arranged by parents, often without informing their daughters.

Deep-rooted cultural norms and poverty are among the major drivers of child marriage (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2016). Parents often view child marriage of their daughter as securing daughters' futures and protecting family honor (Bhandari, 2019). The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), (2012), found that poverty, gender inequality, and patriarchal practices force families to marry off their daughters at an early age. The same report states that education as a protective factor against child marriage, as better-educated fathers are more likely to postpone their daughters' marriage (ICRW, 2012). However, families often try not to challenge traditions due to fear and doubt about their daughters' potential romantic relationship, primarily with the intent of keeping them pure (Pokharel, 2019).

In recent years, a shift in the marriage trend has been seen, with an increasing number of adolescent girls having entered into self-initiated marriages before reaching the age of 20 (AFP, 2020; Bhandari, 2019; JWAS, 2023). A 2012 study reported that 15.1% of adolescent girls initiated their own marriage (Plan Nepal et al., 2012). However, recent research conducted in the Far-Western Province of Nepal shows that this trend is rising (Janaki Women Awareness Society [JWAS], 2023). People often blame social media as one of the encouraging factors of this trend at the initial stage. Some people also have the opinion that

girls seek to enter into marriage due to emotional attachment, friendship, and the desire for physical relationships. However, such statements significantly lack evidence, particularly in the context of Nepal.

Rationale of the Study

Self-initiated child marriages are one of the underexplored areas in the framework of child marriage in Nepal. Unlike arranged marriages, where girls' power is dominated and dreams are overlooked by family members through coercion, self-initiated marriages highlight adolescent agency (ICRW, 2013; Plan Nepal et al. 2012; Thapa & Kunwar, 2021). However, these marriages also expose girls to harmful risks, such as discontinued education, reproductive health issues, and long-term socio-economic vulnerability (Miller et al. 2022). Despite their increasing trend, early-age self-initiated marriage remains one of the poorly researched areas in Nepal.

This research explores the motivations, drivers, and socio-cultural contexts of early-age self-initiated marriage among girls in Nepal. It contributes to enhancing understanding of this rising issue, and therefore, it is highly significant. The findings demonstrate the lived experiences of adolescent girls who took the lead in deciding their own marriage at an early age and provide evidence for addressing the most at risk girls' vulnerabilities.

Research Aims and Questions

The overall aim of this study is to examine the increasing trend of self-initiated marriages among adolescent girls in Nepal and to explore their motivations, underlying causes, and consequences within changing social and digital contexts.

The research specifically seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors that motivate girls to initiate self-marriage at an early age?
2. What are the underlying causes and consequences of early-age self-initiated marriage among girls?
3. What are the changing contexts that are nurturing the interest of girls in early-age self-initiated marriage?

Literature Review

This section reviews existing literature on child marriage in Nepal, with particular attention to the emerging trend of early-age self-initiated marriages. The literature review looks into child marriage within legal and social frameworks, then presents evidence on cultural and religious narratives associated with self-selection of husbands, and finally explores the drivers, as well as the increasing prevalence, of self-initiated marriages.

Child Marriage in Nepal

Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child (Arthur et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2023). Child marriage is a violation of Article 16(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses" (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2012). However, in Nepal, the legal age of marriage for both men and women, as set by the Criminal Code Act of 2017, is 20 years

(Government of Nepal, 2018). It indicates that marriages between 18 and 20 years may not be considered child marriages under international frameworks, but they are illegal under Nepali legal frameworks.

Child marriage interrupts girls' education, limits their earning potential, can lead to early motherhood, restricts their agency, and reinforces cycles of poverty and gender inequality (Chae & Ngo, 2017). It robs girls and boys of their childhood and threatens their well-being (UNICEF, 2025). Nepal ranks second highest in South Asia for the prevalence of child marriage (UNICEF-ROSA, 2023).

Literature also suggests that child marriage is perceived as a strategy to reduce household economic pressures, protect daughters' sexual purity, and follow to social expectations (ICRW, 2012). Parental decisions are heavily shaped by prevailing patriarchal norms, including beliefs around family prestige and daughters' virginity (Pokharel, 2019). Parental education is seen as a protective factor in preventing child marriage to some extent, as better-educated fathers are more likely to postpone their daughters' unions (ICRW, 2012). However, deep-rooted gendered norms and prevailing traditional beliefs often dominate the influence of education.

Differences in Marriage Types

The literature on child marriage also differentiates between child, early, forced, and self-initiated marriages, although they overlap significantly. Child marriage and early marriage largely refer to the same thing; however, early marriage sometimes refers to marriages in which other factors, such as levels of physical, emotional, sexual, and psychosocial development, or a lack of information regarding the person's life options, make them unable to consent to marriage even at 18 years of age (UNFPA, 2025). Sexual Rights Initiative (2013) mentioned that many United Nations resolutions and reports use 'early marriage' and 'child marriage' interchangeably, without any noticeable distinction.

Forced marriages occur when one or both partners enter into marriage without their consent, often under pressure (Thapa & Kunwar, 2021). It also refers to a union in which one or both spouses are unable to end or leave the marriage (UNFPA, 2025). In Nepal, marriages where families or parents decide the groom for their daughters are called arranged marriages. By definition, arranged marriage for an underage person can also be considered forced marriage. As noted by Sexual Rights Initiative (2013), people often use the inclusive term "child, early, and forced marriage", covering child marriages, early marriages, and forced marriages.

Similarly, self-initiated marriages are those in which young people, particularly adolescent girls, take the lead in initiating or deciding upon the marriage without informing parents or seeking approval from them (Thapa & Kunwar, 2021). UNFPA (2025), however, has called marriages where two adolescents under the age of 18 marrying each other voluntarily, "love marriage."

In the context of Nepal, these definitions of child, early, arranged, forced, and self-initiated marriages are influenced by many factors. Girls may consider marriage a choice, but often their decisions are shaped by poverty, school dropout, or family issues. Harmful social norms

and practices further limit girl's choices, as families and girls are strongly influenced by what other people in the community do (Bhandari, 2025; Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014).

Table 1: Prevalence of child marriage by province (% of ever-married women)

Province	<15 years	15–17 years	Total <18	18–20 years	Total <20
National average	10.2	30.4	40.6	35.9	76.5
Koshi	7.9	26.0	33.9	35.1	69.0
Madhesh	13.8	38.1	51.9	37.0	88.9
Bagmati	8.4	24.6	33.0	33.5	66.5
Gandaki	8.5	27.8	36.3	35.5	71.8
Lumbini	10.3	32.1	42.4	37.0	79.4
Karnali	9.3	35.1	44.4	37.9	82.3
Sudurpashchim	13.1	31.8	44.9	37.3	82.2

National Statistics Office, 2022.

The Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) stated that 34.9% of women aged between 20 and 24 had married before 18 and 53.9% before 20 (Ministry of Health et al., 2022). The prevalence of child marriage varies significantly across provinces (*see Table 1*). According to the Nepal national census 2021, 40.6% of ever-married women in Nepal were married before 18 years of age, and 76.5% were married before 20 (National Statistics Office, 2022). Madhesh Province has the highest prevalence with 51.9% of women married before 18, and 88.9% before 20. Similarly, Bagmati Province has the lowest prevalence (33.0% married before 18 years of age, and 66.5% before 20). Karnali, Far-Western, and Lumbini also report high levels, at around 42 to 45% before 18 and over 80% before 20. These figures demonstrate how child marriage is shaped by provincial contexts of poverty, literacy, and deep-rooted socio-cultural influences.

Madhesh Province not only shows the highest prevalence of child marriage but also the earliest average age at first marriage. Nepal Demographic Health Survey data reveal that women aged between 25 and 49 in Madhesh Province married at an average of 16.6 years, compared to a national average of 18.3 (Ministry of Health et al., 2022). These figures highlight the need to pay attention to both regional disparities and changing forms of child marriage in Nepal.

Increasing Trend of Self-Initiated Marriages

Although arranged marriages dominantly occur in Nepal, a recent study shows a growing trend of self-initiated marriages, especially among adolescent girls under the age of 20 (Bhandari, 2019; JWAS, 2023; Plan Nepal et al., 2012).

Referring to the findings of a survey of Girls Not Brides Nepal in 2014, AFP (2020) states that one-third of child marriages in Nepal were initiated by young couples, and that the trend is increasing. Girls Not Brides (2016) also indicates how adolescents in Nepal are choosing

love marriages to escape poverty and social pressure. UNICEF (2025) provided evidence from 2023 that in Madhesh, Lumbini, and Far-Western provinces, one-third of 18–19 year old girls' marriages were self-initiated. This suggests that such self-initiated marriages are increasing, and replacing arranged child marriages, which are declining (Thapa & Kunwar, 2021).

The motivations for self-initiated marriages are varied, but often rooted in love, relationships, and the desire for independence (Pacheco-Montoya et al. 2022). Young people, particularly girls' access to mobile phones and social media is contributing to a greater proportion of child marriages that are initiated by adolescents themselves (UNICEF, 2025). In some cases, girls believe that marriage is better than staying in their restrictive households, and they view marriage as the only way to have a romantic relationship (Pacheco-Montoya et al., 2022). Adolescents also use marriage to avoid forced arrangements and to experience pre-marital romantic relationships in a society where sexual expression outside marriage is strongly prohibited (Bhandari, 2019; Pacheco-Montoya et al., 2022; Plan Nepal et al., 2012; Thapa & Kunwar, 2021).

The literature observes that many people consider self-initiated marriage more common than arranged marriages today. It further highlights how couples are adopting different strategies, such as relocation or cross-border marriage, to avoid legal and social restrictions.

These relationships or unions often reflect a continuity of *Hindu* religious examples, such as *gandharva vivaha* and *swayamvara*², where love and self-choice are legal (Devi, 2015; Olivelle, 2011). At the same time, they represent adaptation to modern influences, including migration, social media, and changing social contexts.

Drivers of Child Marriage in Nepal

Poverty, education, socio-cultural norms, traditional harmful practices against women and girls, religious beliefs, and adolescent agency are regarded as the major drivers of the persistence of child marriage in Nepal (Bhandari, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2016). Families normally view daughters' marriage as a way to reduce financial pressure, particularly in Madhesh Province, where poverty levels are higher than the national average (National Statistics Office, 2024). Dowry expectations further intensify this pressure, as dowry size often increases with the girl's age, encouraging parents to marry off their daughters at an early age (Human Rights Watch, 2016; UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018).

Education strongly influences the age of marriage. Girls from households with uneducated parents are far more likely to marry earlier and leave school (Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017). Similarly, girls who drop out of school or discontinue education, remain at the highest risk of child marriage (Bhandari, 2019). School dropout not only reduces girls' opportunities but also indicates readiness for marriage, reinforcing the cycle of child marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2021).

² *gandharva vivaha* and *swayamvara* are among the eight classical types of marriages in Hindu tradition spheres, that reflect the dynamics of self-initiated marriage.

Patriarchal norms and religious interpretations create further pressure on parents. Forced by social expectations and with a view to protect daughters' virginity and family honor, parents marry off their daughters at an early age (Pokharel, 2019). Religious traditions such as *Kanyadan* (a gift of a virgin girl) frame virginity as a sacred gift (Tesfaye & Chala, 2021), while misinterpretations of texts like the *Manusmriti* (a religious book written in commemoration of the Hindu god-king *Manu*) are used to justify marrying off daughters before puberty (Saxena, 2015).

Family connectedness also sometimes shapes the marriage decisions of girls. Girls who experience caring and supportive relationships with parents are more confident to resist marriage pressure, which eventually contributes to delaying marriage (Onayli & Erdur, 2013; Stafford et al., 2016). Girls who do not experience support and care from the family, may view self-initiated marriage as a better way.

Religious and Historical Narratives of Self-Initiated Marriages

Hindu traditions provide examples of marriages grounded in self-initiated, choice and attraction. Among the eight classical forms of marriage in Hindu religious traditions, *gandharva vivaha* is significant as a marriage based on mutual consent and passion, without parental involvement (Devi, 2015; Olivelle, 2011).

In the *Ramayana* (a highly respected and sacred religious scripture that narrates the history of Lord Ram, Prince of the Ayodhya Kingdom in India, and Goddess Sita, Princess of the Mithila Kingdom in Nepal) Sita's *swayamvara* placed her choice at the centre, as she was central to selecting Ram through a ritual and religious contest (Goldman, 1984).

The *Mahabharata* (another revered religious scripture that narrates the contested relationship between the princely brothers, the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas*, each considering themselves the rightful heirs to the Kingdom of Hastinapur in India) also presents a few examples, such as *Sakuntala* and *Dusyanta's* love relationship in a hermitage, *Damayanti* choosing *Nala* over divine suitors, and *Draupadi* selecting *Arjuna* in a public archery test (Van Buitenen, 1973, 1975). Other *Puranic* (a term used to collectively refer to the religious eras described in Hindu scriptures) traditions such as the *Siva Purana* narrate *Parvati's* devotion to marry *Siva*, affirming her determination to shape her marital destiny (Sastri, 1950/2014).

These examples show that Hindu texts long recognized forms of self-initiated marriage, whether through private affections, public contests, or through devotional power. This suggests that present-day early-age self-initiated marriages in Nepal, therefore, are not entirely modern innovations but resonate with long-standing religious narratives of marriage.

Shifts in Interpretation Over Time

Nepal's own histories remind us how romantic relationships have evolved even under highly restrictive systems. King Rana Bahadur Shah famously broke caste and social restrictions by marrying *Kantabati*, a Brahmin widow, based on his own personal choice and romantic affection (OnlineKhabar, 2020). Similarly, in "Basanti", a novel by Rana (1948), a similar love relationship is narrated, where Gagan Singh Bhandari developed a deep affection for Basanti despite strong caste and class systems.

These examples reflect the deep-rooted patriarchal systems, showing how girls and women under the age of 20 were motivated or forced to make submissive decisions to marry someone, who often convinced them by promises of a better life and a safe future.

However, patriarchal influences over time restricted the spaces for self-choice in marriage. Religious books such as the *Manusmriti* reinforced parental responsibility to marry off daughters at an early age, and community norms increasingly framed arranged marriages as the only honorable option (Saxena, 2015). Despite restrictive boundaries, the historical examples suggest that love, affection, and personal choice, sometimes challenge social, economic, gender, power, and normative boundaries.

Self-initiated marriage in Nepal, particularly in rural communities, is still considered dishonourable with a view that it destroys social reputation and family honor (Bhandari, 2019; Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014; Pokharel, 2019). Some families still connect their family honour with early-age marriages of their daughters; this is viewed as virginity protection of their daughters, which in return, protects their family reputation (Bhandari, 2019; Pokharel 2019).

Such opinions are framed under social and religious norms, which support gendered expectations, often prioritizing family control and girls' submission, which contributes to the persistence of child marriage (Jailobaeva et al., 2024). This connects romantic (sexual) behavior in girlhood to the societal pressure leading to self-initiated marriage (Kohno et al., 2020).

Gaps in Existing Literature

Most literature on child marriage in Nepal focuses on arranged marriage, in its association with poverty, dowry, patriarchal traditions, and lack of education (Plan Asia & ICRW, 2013; Plan Nepal et al., 2012; UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018). These studies provide valuable insights but speak very little about self-initiated marriages.

Few quantitative reports reveal the prevalence rate of self-initiated marriage, and qualitative evidence points to its growing trend (AFP, 2020; JWAS, 2023; Plan Nepal et al., 2012). Thapa and Kunwar (2021) mention briefly the factors, such as social media. However, regarding self-initiated marriage, analysis of girls' motivations, socio-cultural contexts, and consequences remains limited. Despite, the increasing trend of love and self-initiated marriage, Nepal still lacks significant evidence on it.

These gaps suggest the need for focused research on early-age self-initiated marriages in Nepal. This study responds to that need, capturing the lived experiences, motivations, and contexts of adolescent girls, stakeholders, and particularly women who choose to marry before 20 years by self-initiation.

Methodology

This section presents the methodology applied in the research, including research design, selection of provinces, sampling, data collection, and analysis ([see the Flowchart of Research Methodology in Annex One](#)).

Research Design

This research used a qualitative exploratory design to explore the increasing trend of early-age self-initiated marriage among young girls in Nepal. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of informants' experiences, motivations, and perceptions (Creswell, 2013). The research focused on exploring the motivations, drivers, consequences, and changing contexts that shape self-initiated child marriage.

Selection of Provinces

The study was conducted in four out of the seven provinces in Nepal. Koshi, Madhesh, Lumbini, and Far-Western Provinces were selected purposively using a composite scoring method combining two indicators: the prevalence of child marriage before the age of 18³, and the size of the female population aged between 20 and 29 years. The female population of this age group was considered because women of this age group, who had entered into self-initiated marriages before the age of 20, were the primary source of information for this research (*see Annex Two for more details on the selection of provinces*).

Sampling

Informants were identified through purposive sampling, in consultation with civil society organisations (CSOs) and members of [Girls Not Brides Nepal](#). Primary informants included 60 people, 14 from each selected province and four from the national level.

- Category A- Twenty-four women (six women per province) who had entered into self-initiated marriages before the age of 20⁴, and who were between 20 and 29 at the time of interview (Between January and June 2025).
- Category B- Eight unmarried girls, two from each province, who were between 20 and 29 years, included for comparative perspectives with the Category A informants.
- Category C (stakeholders)- Twenty four provincial stakeholders, including female journalists, CSO representatives, principals/head teachers, religious leaders, and parents of an adolescent daughters; one informant from each category per province, except CSO representatives, who were two.
- Category D (national stakeholders)- Four national-level informants, including two researchers, one national CSO's representative, and one journalist.

Similarly, secondary informants included leaders and members of Girls Not Brides Nepal.

Data Collection

Data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) from 60 primary informants. Three sets of open-ended questionnaires were developed for: (i) married women who entered into marriage at an early age through self-initiation, (ii) unmarried girls, and (iii) stakeholders. The questionnaires were finalized with input from the secretariat of Girls Not

³ The selection of province relied on prevalence data on child marriage before the age of 18 years.

⁴ The selection of married women who entered into marriage by self-initiation included young women aged between 20 and 29 years at the time of interview, but entered into self-initiated marriages before they were 20.

Brides Nepal⁵ and a Kathmandu-based Senior Regional Partnership and Impact Officer of Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership⁶. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with a couple of informants, within the sample. The questionnaire was based on three research questions: factors motivating self-initiated marriage, underlying causes and consequences, and changing contexts nurturing the trend of self-initiated marriage.

Data Collection Procedure

Primary data collection was conducted in two stages. In stage one, 56 KIIs were conducted in four provinces, 14 in each province. Two researchers, one male and one female, were deployed for this research. In Lumbini and Far-Western Provinces, assistant researchers assigned by Girls Not Brides Nepal members (*see Annex Three*) were mobilized. In Madhesh and Koshi Provinces, which are existing working areas of JWAS, JWAS mobilized its own assistant researchers.

While in-person interviews were prioritized, some interviews were conducted online, considering informants' availability, geographical distance, and comfort.

The views of secondary informants were collected via email.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed, translated into English, and analysed using deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A deductive approach, guided by the research questions, was combined with an inductive approach, grounded in the collected information, to capture emerging themes.

The process ensured that informants' voices remained central while themes were situated within broader research questions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical safeguards were strictly followed. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity of the 60 primary informants were maintained throughout this research. This was agreed upon obtaining informed consent from them. All informants were aged over 20 years.

Interviews were conducted sensitively, and provincial researchers received orientations on ethics, interviewing, and safeguarding.

Age Profile of Married Women and Unmarried Girls

The study included 24 women who had entered into self-initiated marriages at an early age. Among them, two participants were aged 14 years at the time of marriage, six were aged 16 years, nine were aged 18 years, and five were aged 19 years.

⁵ Girls Not Brides Nepal; <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/our-partnership/national-partnerships-coalitions/nepal/>

⁶ Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage; <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/>

Similarly, at the time of interview, six participants were aged 21 years, three were 22 years, and five were 24 years (see Table 2).

Table 2: Age Profile of Married Women and Unmarried Girls

Married women who entered into marriage by self-initiation				Unmarried Girls	
Age at Marriage	Number of Informants	Age at Interview	Number of Informants	Age at Interview	Number of Informants
14	2	21	6	22	2
15	1	22	3	23	3
16	6	23	1	24	2
17	1	24	5	25	1
18	9	25	2		
19	5	26	1		
		27	2		
		28	4		
Total	24	Total	24	Total	8

Source: Key Informants' Interview

In comparison, the unmarried girls interviewed were between 22 and 25 years of age. Two of them were aged 22 years, three were 23 years, two were 24 years, and one was 25 years.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the research, organised thematically. The themes reflect the motivations, influences, and pressures that shape early-age self-initiated marriages, as well as the consequences experienced by such married women. It also highlights the aspirations and recommendations shared directly by the informants.

Peer Influence and Romantic Motivations

One of the major findings that significantly motivated young girls toward self-initiated marriage in early ages was found to be peer influence. Many married women were found to be following the examples of their close friends. They were first motivated to fall into romantic relationships, as one married woman from Madhesh Province, aged 27, explained,

"I was motivated to receive love by seeing my colleague who entered into marriage by self-initiation."

Some married women and unmarried girls stated that their attraction to boys was based on boys' appearance, which created romantic motivation for them. One 21-year old married woman from Koshi Province, said,

"He was very handsome, and he promised me that he would keep me very happy."

Most married women informed that emotional attachment was the main reason behind self-initiated marriage. These attachments often began as out of school friendships, school-based friendships, or neighborhood interactions, which gradually developed into romantic relationships. One woman, who had married at 16, now 24, described,

"The cause of my marriage was friendship with a boy who had come to my neighbour's, his uncle's, home. He used to come there frequently, where our friendship began. Gradually, I liked him, believed him, and decided to marry him."

Married women, Lumbini Province.

Many girls were also found to start friendships after seeing their friends engaged in arranged marriage, often at an early age. For such girls and women, the idea of self-initiated marriage became a symbol of independence. One married woman, aged 24, from Far-Western Province responded to a question, "In your opinion, why can a girl who falls in love at an early age not wait until and beyond 20 years?", stating,

"Other girls of my age married against their wish. I was in relationship and then decided to marry to avoid the risk of marrying someone whom I might not know."

Unmarried girls also recognized peer influence as a potential motivating factor. One 22-year old unmarried girl, studying at bachelor's level, from Lumbini Province said,

"Girls learn from their friends. When their friend or neighbor girl does self-marriage, they may also follow the path."

They had seen their friends talking and sharing such thoughts. However, the unmarried girls emphasized the importance of delaying marriage under any condition to focus on education and financial independence. An unmarried girl, 23, Far-Western Province, explained,

"I have to be independent and make my career. I want to be financially independent."

All the unmarried girls talked about financial independence as one of the crucial requirements for girls and women to live a free and independent life.

A school principal explained the pattern of friendship that often turns into romantic attachments leading to marriage. According to him, it is beyond childhood friendship and same-grade friendship at school,

"It is interesting that often girls develop a love relationship with someone whom they meet later in life, usually outside of school. Within schools, girls often prefer to develop a relationship with students from another grade. Normally, they do not love and marry someone whom they have known since childhood."

Principal, Far-Western Province.

Many married women supported this view, stating that they married someone they met outside their existing friendships. However, some married women also explained that their romantic motivation started in their school life. A woman who had married at 19 stated,

"We had love feeling for each other in our school. Our secret motivations reached to our family and neighbours. Then we decided to marry",

Married women, 28, Koshi Province.

Overall, love, trust, the desire for companionship, and the aspiration to live a happy life were described as contributing factors motivating early-age girls toward self-initiated marriage

Expanded Friendship Circles

The research also found that adolescents' friendship networks over the last 15 years have expanded compared to the past. Most people now have circles of friends beyond their immediate community, and even beyond the country. A 24-year old unmarried girl from Lumbini Province argued,

"The growth of these circles has been primarily influenced by social media and digital communication, migration, tourism, cultural events, and public gatherings."

Most of the informants said that social media, primarily Facebook and TikTok, contribute to digital friendship expansion, making it easier for people to exchange ideas and opinions.

The large number of friends in different communities has allowed young girls to interact with a wider variety of people, express their feelings, and initiate emotional connections. These friendship circles significantly contributed to the increased feeling of romantic interest and self-initiated marriage among young girls,

"Now I have friends from other villages and even outside the country. We talk freely on Facebook Messenger and share our feelings. This makes it easier to develop relationships."

Unmarried girl, aged 23, Madhesh Province.

Journalists, civil society representatives, parents, religious leaders, and teachers also had similar responses. The number of friends has expanded from a few to thousands. One father from Far-Western Province stated,

"When I was a child, I could count my friends. They were very few. At the same age, my children now have thousands of friends. They do not even remember the total number of their friends."

The more friends, the more exposure to different lifestyles. The increase in friends, further combined with digital communication through social media, influenced emotional experiences during adolescence and triggered decision-making toward romantic relationships and self-initiated marriage at an early age.

Influence of Digital Technologies: Social Media and Smartphones

Mobile phones and social media were repeatedly cited as key factors in early-age self-initiated marriages. Most informants immediately responded, "social media" or "Facebook and TikTok" when asked, "In the present context, what factors encourage young girls to take the bold decision of self-initiated marriage at an early age?", often before the question was completely asked. They believed that almost everyone now has access to smartphones, Facebook, and TikTok. Children also spend a long-time using YouTube and other social media channels for entertainment and networking.

Many informants, including parents themselves, criticized some parents for providing smartphones to young children. However, children often use them without guidance, which

encourages early-age romantic relationships. One principal from Lumbini Province explained,

"Parents don't care whether their children are going in the right way or the wrong way. They give them mobile phones at an early age, while they are still in lower grades, and they do not monitor what their children watch."

While most married women did not cite social media as the first point of connection explicitly, they acknowledged it as a factor that contributed to sustaining regular interaction. For them, mobile phones and Facebook Messenger were mostly used after romantic feelings had developed. It was not an attraction point, but a factor that deepened their feelings of love. This response contrasted with the responses of unmarried girls. A 22-year unmarried girl highlighted social media as a primary driver contributing to the increasing trend of self-initiated marriage at an early age,

"Social media and mobiles are the start for self-initiated marriage. Boys use it to share emotional words that girls easily believe. When girls are emotionally manipulated, they do not think further."

Unmarried girl, 24, Madhesh Province.

Platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube were repeatedly described as accelerating adolescent romantic relationships. Social media facilitated connections, expanded friendship circles, and created private rooms for communication, which strengthened emotional connectedness. One father from Koshi Province also echoed the voice of an unmarried girl,

"Social media is the major reason that brings boys and girls closer."

Most stakeholders responded that easy access to online sexual content is a major driver transforming romantic relationships into sexual relationships, which sometimes led to early-age marriage by self-initiation. However, this view contrasted with the responses of self-married women.

Cultural Events and Public Spaces

Most stakeholders and unmarried girls highlighted cultural events, fairs, night shows, and concerts as common meeting points for adolescents, particularly those in grades eight to 12.

"These spaces provide opportunities for unmonitored interactions, where young people may interact with someone, knowingly and unknowingly."

Father, Far-Western Province.

Such interactions could develop into physical relationships that sometimes result in early-age self-initiated marriage. This was compared to the "twitterpated" feeling described in the *Bambi* Movie (1942), reflecting the sudden and intense emotions that can emerge when young people encounter free and less restrictive environments.

Many married women also reported meeting their future partners at local cultural fairs, tourism sites, and other public spaces, either for the first time or to deepen their relationship. One woman, aged 22, Koshi Province, described,

"I met him at a village fair. We liked each other, and we started talking. Gradually, I decided to marry him."

Citing the same, religious leaders emphasized the need for parental control until children reach maturity or the age of 20. One religious leader from Lumbini Province expressed his concern,

"Girls' mobility should always be supervised by guardians. If girls fall in love and marry at an early age, the responsibility lies with their parents."

This opinion of the religious leader, however, does not resonate with the renowned love marriages from the religious era, explained in the section on [religious and historical narratives of self-initiated marriages](#), where the choice of girls or goddesses was at the center. Similarly, this view supports the entrenched patriarchal thinking, which always values male superiority and fosters discrimination between boys and girls. In contrast, a researcher stated,

"Our society needs to be freed from such discriminatory thoughts that reinforce gender inequality that support masculinity and intends to shape the girls rights and freedom."

The opinion of the religious leader was also contrasted with most other informants, including parents and unmarried girls. They emphasized that adolescents need freedom together with guidance. One unmarried girl, who was studying away from home, insisted,

"My parents have given me freedom and I am alone here. This does not mean that I am free to do anything against their wishes. This should be balanced."

Unmarried girl, 22, Far-Western Province.

Informants also described strategies that young couples often use to maintain relationships by avoiding social inspection. These included night-time rituals, religious ceremonies, and local markets. CSO representatives and journalists noted an increase in self-initiated marriages linked to cultural fairs, consistent with the experiences reported by the married women who entered marriage by self-initiation.

In places where tourists often visit, informal relationships between local girls and outsiders were observed. One informant from Far-Western Province, who was also a member of a local tourism board, shared his personal experience,

"Some young girls seek the opportunity to become intimate with tourists, thinking that tourists are rich. Some tourists, sometimes, take advantage of such interest from girls."

However, there is no formal or informal documentation or record of this.

Emotional and Sentimental Pressures

Emotional and sentimental pressures were found to be strong drivers of early-age self-initiated marriage among girls. Friendships between boys and girls often develop into

romantic relationships, which create pressure on girls to respond. One married woman who married at the age of 14, shared,

"The boy, now my husband, was a tractor driver and often visited my field to plough. I knew he liked me. One day he told me that if I did not marry him, he would die. I was afraid, so I ran away with him."

Married women, 24, Madhesh Province.

She explained that while she liked him, she could not judge right from wrong. Emotional pressure pushed her toward marriage, even when it was not entirely driven by her own romantic feelings. Such accounts highlight how girls are sometimes pressured by emotional influence.

In some cases, difficult circumstances, such as sexual abuse by family members, pushed girls to seek relationships outside the household. A married woman who married at the age of 16, now 22, from Far-Western Province responded,

"Child sexual abuse by close family members is one of the reasons for girls to marry someone who loves them, because they cannot share such incidents with their family."

Although she did not mention this explicitly, her response clearly indicated that this was the reason behind her own marriage. For such girls, marriage was seen as a form of protection from unsafe homes, relatives, and society.

These experiences raise questions about whether such marriages, although outside parental consent, can truly be considered self-initiated, or are instead a form of psychological pressure, reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal influences.

On the other hand, some informants from Far-Western Province expressed fear of suicide that a girl might commit if relationships are interrupted by parents. A teacher stated,

"Out of fear of suicide, some parents do not stop love relationships of their daughters."

Some of them have led to early-age self-initiated marriage.

Migration and Modernity

Labor migration, internal tourism, and exposure to urban lifestyles were found to influence girls' aspirations and increase their access to potential partners at an early age. Some married women described that their partners had returned home on vacation from foreign employment. When it was time for them to leave Nepal again for work, they quickly proposed marriage. One married woman shared,

"We were in a romantic relationship. He said he had to go to the Gulf country for his job. By the time he returned, my parents would have arranged my marriage. So, we thought we could not wait and got married."

Married woman, 24, Madhesh Province.

Stakeholders pointed out that foreign migration and urban exposure also shaped young girls' ideas about love, relationships, and marriage. Adolescents who saw friends or relatives living

in city areas or foreign countries were likely to form romantic attachments as a way to pursue similar lifestyles. Such attachments often led to marriage at an early age.

Informants identified ages 15 to 17 as a vulnerable period when romantic relationships can grow quickly, stating that the age group between 15 and 17 corresponds to school grades where adolescent mobility increases and parental supervision is not always possible. Free mobility and a sense of limited parental boundaries make young girls more vulnerable to the risk of unsafe romantic relationships. Such relationships can easily turn into early-age self-initiated marriage.

Additionally, a journalist from Lumbini stated,

"Some adolescents in this age group relocate within Nepal or travel across the border to India to avoid social scrutiny and restrictions, where they can easily marry."

Friends and family networks often facilitate such short-term migration, and couples may return once tensions relax. The growing patterns of mobility and exposure to new environments play a key role in the growth of early-age self-initiated marriage.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Influences

As noted above, most self-initiated marriages were described as personal choices. However, they were deeply influenced by broader socio-economic and cultural factors. Poverty, illiteracy, and limited education, as well as entrenched cultural norms shaped early age marriage decisions significantly.

Informants, particularly married women and stakeholders, consistently highlighted poverty as a key background factor. One researcher stated,

"Families with limited resources often pay less attention to their daughters' needs, mobility, and relationships, which unintentionally facilitates early-age self-initiated marriages."

The research also found that some parents do not respond to their daughters' relationships. A married woman from Madhesh Province stated that she was surprised when she learned that her parents were aware of her love relationship but did not react before her marriage.

Civil society leaders also supported such opinions. The reason behind such cases was poverty and the deep-rooted practice of dowry. This suggests how financial hardships sometimes lead families to unknowingly support their daughters in marrying at an early age as a way to reduce household burdens or avoid dowry costs. However, married women did not explicitly mention dowry as a driver of their early-age self-initiated marriage.

Education emerged as both a protective factor and a potential risk. One of the common responses was,

"Girls who continued their schooling were less likely to marry at an early age."

However, adolescence was described as a critical period for emotional attachment. As a principal of Madhesh Province explained,

"It is also a critical age for adolescents to fall in love, to become emotionally attached to someone who promises long-lasting love."

While in school, young students are exposed to lessons on the reproductive system and associated knowledge. This sometimes increased curiosity towards physical relationships. One researcher pointed out,

"Sexual desire is one of the key factors behind early-age self-initiated marriage. At school, they study the reproductive system. When adolescents learn about reproduction, curiosity leads to experimenting, often without contraception, resulting in pregnancy. Such relationships are forced to turn into self-initiated marriage at an early age."

Although such cases were relatively rare, this perspective helps explain why some marriages occur quickly following pregnancy or to legitimize a romantic relationship. In contrast, none of the married women themselves cited sexual desire as the primary motivation for their early-age self-initiated marriage.

Sometimes people use common sayings in daily life without considering their influence, which drives young girls' motivation towards self-initiated marriage. One member organization of Girls Not Brides Nepal reflected,

"Family members and relatives sometimes tell adolescent girls, 'When I was your age, I already had two children. You still behave like a child.' Such statements, along with certain cultural proverbs, affect the psychology of young girls and may push them towards self-initiated marriage at an early age."

A few stakeholders also suggested hypotheses linking junk or fast-food consumption to hormonal changes in adolescents, which may increase their interest in physical relationships. Such relationships may turn into self-initiated marriage while they are still children. However, this research did not find any evidence regarding a link between food consumption and hormonal changes.

Unmarried girls and stakeholders also spoke about the impact of climate change in relation to food consumption, hormonal changes, and growing curiosity of young people about physical relationships. They further linked climate change to entrenched poverty and livelihood challenges, which may pressure young girls into early-age self-initiated marriage. According to one civil society leader from Madhesh Province,

"The impact of climate change is contributing to the persistence of child marriage in Nepal and poses a serious risk. However, this remains one of the underexplored areas, and very little discussion is taking place in this regard."

Many stakeholders recommended that the nexus between climate change and child marriage in the context of Nepal be considered as one of the areas to explore through research in the future.

Gender Norms and Social Constraints

Patriarchal gender norms were found to strongly shape adolescents' marriage decisions. Some informants favored girls' freedom, some called for a balance between freedom and control, and others called for strict control and parental supervision. Civil society leaders, teachers, journalists, and unmarried girls mentioned that educated and job-holding parents encourage independence and freedom of girls. In contrast, traditional families preferred to keep girls under their control. This latter view was supported by the opinions of a couple of parents and religious leaders. In both scenarios, inadequate communication, restrictions on girls' freedom, and inconsistent parental guidance left girls vulnerable to the risk of early-age self-initiated marriage.

Social constraints acted both as a preventive and a pressing factor. Girls feared that if relationships became public, gossip and reputational damage could push them into early-age marriage. On the other hand, the same fear of social gossip discouraged some girls from marrying at an early-age. One unmarried girl shared,

"I saw people insulting the mother of a self-married girl, saying, 'the daughter is just like her mother.' That experience discouraged me from considering self-marriage to avoid dishonouring my mother and family."

Unmarried girl, 22, Far-Western Province.

Journalists and married women emphasized that family restrictions and community stigma were the major risks. A journalist explained,

"Young people cannot openly express their love relationships, nor explore physical relationships safely. So, when they find meeting points such as cultural fairs, they use those spaces to pursue their desire. Most cases of early-age self-initiated marriage I have observed follow this pattern."

Parents acknowledged the challenge of balancing supervision with trust. They talked about a combination of control and freedom, together with family togetherness, as an important aspect. However, for many parents, mobile phones and social media, undermine parental guidance. Children intend to imitate what they see on digital platforms and what their friends are doing.

Family and Community Reactions

The research found that family and community reactions to self-initiated marriages were mixed, ranging from resistance to eventual acceptance. Most married women said their parents strongly opposed their marriages immediately after the marriage. Some parents also tried to separate the married couples. However, gradually they became more accepting, and they accepted the marriages. One married woman from Madhesh Province, aged 27, reflected,

"After my marriage, I was isolated from my parents. They did not talk with me for a long time. They, together with other relatives, tried to separate us not once, not twice, but thrice. However, each time they failed, and finally, they accepted the marriage."

Other informants also said that this often happens to most parents whose daughters enter into self-initiated marriages. They often try to bring their daughter back and arrange her marriage with someone of their choice. Such parental efforts rarely succeed. This demonstrates both the determination of early-age self-married couples and the parental practice of addressing social tensions. In some cases, tensions persisted for years. A married woman, aged 28, from Lumbini Province, explained,

"No one from my family communicated with me for up to eight years after I married. Later, they started talking. Now all things are settled."

Community responses often revolve around norms and values related to family honor and social reputation. Families, particularly mothers, were blamed for failing to control daughters. One unmarried girl angrily stated,

"When a girl takes the lead to marry, it is the girl's family who faces social gossip and stigma. People blame them as if they have lost the meaning of their existence. But this happens rarely to the boy's family. Even in the boys family, girls are the ones people blame for the marriage."

Unmarried girl, 24, Lumbini Province.

This discrimination between girls and boys further reinforced patriarchal norms, showing how women are still discriminated against under the prevailing gender norms. Sometimes, such negative comments against girls' families continue even when families accept the marriage. She further added,

"This is why, an early-age married couple, these days, lives away from both of their societies for a few years."

Unmarried girl, 24, Lumbini Province.

Some parents and even unmarried girls stated that they now talk in their families about boyfriends, romantic relationships, and marriage interests. This reflects a gradual shift in attitudes within families, which, according to one unmarried girl from Koshi Province, aged 24, allows girls who are in relationships to wait until they complete their education, and then decide on marriage according to their wishes.

Girls emphasized the value of open communication at home to feel emotionally free. An unmarried girl, aged 22, from Far-Western Province, advised other girls, particularly those who are under the age of 20,

"Be frank at home. Share everything. Even if someone sends you a love message, tell your parents. They may be angry at first, but it saves you."

Such conversations relieve girls of their mental burden, and the parents' suggestions further strengthen their decision-making power in relation to studies, careers, and marriage.

Consequences of Early-Age Self-Initiated Marriage

Early-age self-initiated marriages have wide-ranging consequences across education, health, economic security, and personal well-being.

All the married women did not express regret regarding their marriage decisions, but they accepted that early-age marriage prevented them from continuing their education. A woman from Madhesh Province, married at 14, now 26, stated,

"If I had not married, I would have studied more. However, I am happy and I don't regret that I married him."

Educational impact was the most immediate and consistent effect of early-age self-initiated marriage. All the married women left school at the time of marriage or shortly afterward. Reflecting on her school days, one married woman, from Koshi Province, responded,

"To marry below 20 is not good. I dropped out of school because of my decision to marry at an early age."

According to her, she was in grade 10 at the time of her marriage. The testimonies of married women suggest that even their husbands had to discontinue their education. One married woman from Far-Western Province said that her husband was a college student, but he had to start a job and could not continue his education.

These experiences highlight how self-initiated marriage at an early age can shorten schooling for both partners, often pushing them prematurely into low-wage work. All the married women reflected on the long-term value of education, as most of them stated that girls should marry after 20 or 22 so that they can study, get a degree, and earn.

Unmarried girls emphasized the importance of fulfilling future aspirations and living an independent life. They perceived that early-age marriage blocks every future possibility for girls. This was further entrenched by early motherhood, which was common among early-age self-initiated marriages. One married woman, married for six years by self-initiation, and now 22, stated,

"Now we have a baby of five years."

This reflects the transition of young, immature couples into family responsibilities, ultimately closing all the doors of education and career opportunities.

These experiences indicate that early-age self-initiated marriage may feel like a choice in the moment but can result in long-term constraints recognized only later. Teachers consistently linked early-age marriage to school dropout, recommending school-based sexuality education and stronger communication between schools and parents as possible measures to reduce early-age self-initiated marriage.

After early-age marriage, most of the husbands entered into the job market in Nepal or in foreign countries. Most married women who entered into marriage by self-initiation were found engaged with family responsibilities. Some were, however, assisting their husband's small businesses. A couple of them were also working as social activists. Some women also stated that their husbands wanted them to stay at home, not to work outside, which they followed. They insisted that they are happy and their husbands have fulfilled their wishes.

However, such women also described a shift from romance to daily responsibilities after marriage. This further created a gap in their friends' circles. One married woman, 27, Far-Western Province, regretted,

"I had many good friends. After marriage, the friendship with them did not remain the same."

She further added,

"Anyway, I have many new friends even now and am in contact with some of my previous friends as well."

Views on Reducing Early-Age Self-Initiated Marriage

Both married women who entered into marriage by self-initiation and unmarried girls suggested recommendations to reduce the risks of early-age marriage, focusing on communication, education, and skill development. Their insights highlight the importance of empowering adolescents to make informed decisions.

Stakeholders stressed the importance of school-based sexuality education to counter myths and provide accurate information about relationships, consent, and contraception. Unmarried girls advised delaying marriage until they completed at least the 12th grade and developing employable skills. They also suggested skill-based learning programs and meaningful activities to keep adolescents engaged, confident, and less vulnerable to emotional relationships.

Informants recommended responsive local government actions and guardian training to safeguard adolescents. Civil society leaders, journalists, and teachers emphasized the need for clear policies and procedures to respond quickly when adolescents face risky relationships or receive pressure. Training for guardians was also recommended to update parenting skills in the digital era, particularly in monitoring the use of mobile and social media.

Unmarried girls and journalists emphasized that freedom means the ability to study, work, earn, and make independent choices. It does not mean being forced into adult roles prematurely. In parts of the Far-Western Province, informants noted that drug use and conflict among boys could create unsafe relationships, which may lead to early-age self-initiated marriages. They suggested the need for preventive measures and stronger enforcement to protect adolescents.

Perceptions on the Minimum Age to Marry

Across interviews, all informants consistently emphasized that marriage should not occur before the age of 20. While early-age married women did not express regret about their own early-age marriages, they highlighted the benefits of delaying marriage for education, health, and economic status. One early-age married informant reflected,

"I am happy now, but girls should marry at 20 or 22. Then they can continue their studies, get a degree, and earn along with their family life. I have realized that women should also earn."

Married woman, 22, Far-Western Province.

Another woman, married at 14, strongly advised against marrying below 20 years. It is very bad for girls' careers and well-being. Teachers, parents, and community stakeholders also echoed these views, emphasizing that age 20 is a threshold at which young women are better prepared.

Some informants further explained that girls are not emotionally mature enough to marry before 20. Some others insisted that, to adjust to family and social responsibilities, girls must cross 20 before marriage. Informants also talked from the perspectives of health, stating that girls are not physically prepared to marry and give birth before 20. Unmarried girls emphasized the importance of higher education, income, and pursuing their dreams. As one such girl stated,

"Early-age marriage leads to early-age childbirth. Then we cannot develop our careers further, cannot study, and earn properly. A girl who is uneducated and jobless, remains dependent on her husband. This is not our dream. This is not the dream of my parents either. In my opinion, a girl should only marry when she fulfills her minimum dream, at least when she starts earning in her own capacity. It can be at 20, 25, or over 30. I am 23 now, but I think I would not marry for the next five years."

Unmarried girl, 23, Madhesh Province.

Informants of this research clearly demanded "20 years" as the minimum age for marriage. While they gave varied explanations for why the minimum age of marriage should be set at 20, a common response was,

"A girl should only marry after being educated and starting to earn."

Informants expressed this as a minimum condition before marriage.

Discussion

This study explores early-age self-initiated marriages in Nepal, revealing how girls interact with structural, cultural, and familial influences. Peer networks emerged as a strong factor in shaping decisions, with girls noting that friends who were married or in romantic relationships inspired others to pursue similar paths. This finding aligns with social learning theory, suggesting that people learn behaviors through observation (Bandura, 1977).

Romantic attachments and emotional pressures were found to be central to adolescents' decisions, in where girls are often expected to respond. These findings echo previous research on adolescent decision-making under relational pressure (Pacheco-Montoya et al., 2022).

While exploring such experiences aligns with qualitative research, women who entered into marriage by self-initiation at an early age may have underreported certain experiences due to concerns about social prestige.

Digital technologies, particularly mobile phones and social media, were reported as key facilitators of early-age romantic relationships. Married women who entered into marriage by self-initiation at an early age emphasized social media as one of the major factors that contributed to bringing them closer to their partners. This finding supports prior studies on the role of digital media in adolescent relationship formation (UNICEF, 2025).

Although this study did not quantify social media use by specific platforms and frequency, the data explored the ways through which online chatting or interactions on Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok promote emotional connections. Digital literacy initiatives for both parents and adolescents are needed to reduce risks associated with early-age marriages. While there is a huge evidence gap in this area, research is recommended focusing on safe usage of digital technologies and social media.

Cultural events, public spaces, and unsupervised gatherings were identified as common settings where romantic relationships often begin. This finding reflects adolescents' behavior within local cultural practices; however, these findings cannot be generalized to all settings.

Migration and exposure to urban environments broadened adolescents' aspirations and access to potential partners. These findings are consistent with Schug, Yuki, Horikawa, and Takemura (2009) showing that relational mobility creates a "free market" of social relationships, in which people voluntarily form new relationships and leave undesirable ones based on their personal preferences (cited in Li, Wang, & Lin, 2022). The study provides real-life examples of migration-driven relational dynamics. However, it may underrepresent adolescents who avoid early-age self-initiated marriages.

Socio-economic and cultural factors, social norms and constraints, and entrenched gender norms, were also found to be drivers of early-age self-initiated marriage. Families under financial pressure sometimes provided silent approval to their daughters' early-age self-initiated marriages to reduce economic burdens or dowry costs. Exposure to modern lifestyles, tourism, and cross-border interactions also shaped girls' decision to take the lead in marrying. These findings support existing research linking structural inequalities to child marriage (Bhandari, 2019; UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018).

Educated and employed parents sometimes encouraged independence, while traditional families tried to maintain tight supervision. These socio-economic and cultural factors are also influenced by the impacts of climate change, which may drive early-age self-initiated marriage, although evidence remains limited. Further research to examine the nexus between climate change and child marriage is recommended.

The consequences of early-age self-initiated marriages, including family and community reactions, cover education, health, economic independence, psychosocial well-being, and families' societal honor. Informants reported impacts in schooling, early parenthood, and restricted self-choice. However, due to the prevailing concept of patriarchy, most of these consequences were found associated with women.

Similarly, a response from an unmarried girl suggests entrenched gender norms, where most mothers of early-age self-married girls are unnecessarily blamed by their own neighbours, and by the neighbours of their in-laws. This further raises the question of how picture would be changed if self-initiated marriage would not automatically lead to the consequences in the life of girls such as bearing children, dropping out, and taking charge of household responsibilities? This research has been conducted from the perspectives of girls and women. This demands further research from the perspective of boys as well.

Informants offered practical recommendations emphasizing open parental communication and education. For example, if a young girl receives a love message, it should be shared with parents. Informants consistently emphasized that marriage should not occur before the age of 20, recognizing that adolescents are better prepared emotionally, socially, and economically at this age. These findings align with Nepal's legal frameworks and provide strong evidence for age-specific policy recommendations. Centering adolescents' voices, this research strengthens its relevance for policy and program design. Formative research is recommended to inform local level child marriage ending policies that empower adolescents, enhance life skills, and strengthen supportive governance structures to prevent early-age self-initiated marriage.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussions, the first conclusion of this research is that early-age self-initiated marriages of girls in Nepal are shaped by a multifaceted interaction of socio-cultural, structural, and relational factors. Peer networks, romantic attachments, and digital technologies strongly influence adolescents' decisions, while migration and exposure to urban environments expand desires and opportunities for relationships. These findings highlight that early-age self-initiated marriage is not solely an individual choice but is embedded in social learning, emotional pressures, and modernizing influences. Similarly, public and cultural environments also provide exposure to early-age romantic interactions, leading to early marriage.

The second conclusion of this research is related to socio-economic and cultural drivers, including poverty, limited education, and entrenched gender norms. Families under financial pressure, combined with societal expectations related to dowry, sometimes indirectly support early-age self-initiated marriage. Stakeholders and unmarried girls' opinions also suggest that socio-economic and cultural factors are also influenced by the impacts of climate change, which sometimes lead to early-age self-initiated marriage. Patriarchal norms and community stigma related to early-age romantic relationships further force some young girls toward self-initiated marriage.

Although married women did not express dissatisfaction with their marital lives, informants consistently responded regarding educational impact, early parenthood, dependency, including economic dependency, psychological and societal impacts. These outcomes demonstrate that early marriage, even when self-initiated, can compromise long-term well-being.

The final conclusion highlights adolescents' own recommendations and visions. Informants emphasized open parental communication, delaying marriage to at least 20 or 22, and education. Informants consistently emphasized that marriage should not occur before the age of 20, recognizing that adolescents are better prepared emotionally, socially, and economically at this age. These findings indicate that adolescents are capable of developing practical strategies to reduce risks through exercising their agency.

Recommendation

Drawing from the findings, discussions, and conclusions, this research recommends the following:

Leadership and Advocacy Skills Building among Adolescents

This study recommends building leadership and advocacy skills among adolescents to support them in making informed decisions. Similarly, programs that build skills among adolescents to handle emotional pressures imposed by family members and society are also recommended.

Based on the specific local context, community-based organisations, youth-led networks, youth clubs, schools, and local NGOs working directly on ending child marriage can work together with local governments to develop effective initiatives for building leadership and advocacy skills among adolescents.

Intergenerational Dialogues at Local Levels

Intergenerational dialogues between parents, children, stakeholders, and policymakers can be a platform for girls to show their maturity to their parents. As the study received some responses favoring parents' supervision, they should be informed about the rights of girls to decide on their own. Therefore, such dialogues can address questions related to girls' independence, leadership skills, social freedom, and the relevance of parental supervision.

These interventions can be led by NGOs in collaboration with youth clubs. Schools in the area can also include this in their educational calendar as extracurricular activities. Local governments can also include lessons on intergenerational dialogues in their local curriculum.

Promoting Digital Literacy

Digital literacy programs for both parents and adolescents are needed to reduce the risks associated with social media and mobile technologies. Initiatives that promote the safe use of social media and mobile phones can help address one of the emerging drivers of early-age self-initiated marriages. School-based short-term orientations, community-level workshops, and awareness campaigns that promote safe digital practices can be conducted by NGOs.

Local governments can initiate specific programs in collaboration with information and communication technology-focused organizations to provide training to youth both in school and out of school.

Further Research

Finally, as evidence gaps remain significant, this study recommends further research in the following areas:

This study covered the perspective of girls and women. However, the findings indicate the influence of gender norms and masculinity in the lives of women who married at an early age. Therefore, this research recommends conducting similar research from the perspectives of boys and men.

Exploration of the safe use of digital technologies such as social media and mobile phones among adolescents is another recommended area for future research.

Similarly, understanding the nexus between climate change and child marriage, particularly how climate-induced challenges shape the marriage decisions of parents and girls, will provide valuable evidence for future interventions to end child marriage and is identified as another research area.

The above proposed three research areas can be conducted by research institutions and NGOs at the national and provincial level.

Finally, a rigorous formative research is recommended for developing local child marriage ending policies that can address structural challenges such as poverty, migration-related challenges, parental fear, dowry-related challenges, and other factors that indirectly support early-age self-initiated marriage. These issues can be different from one context to another, from one local government (local body) to another. Therefore, local governments can collaborate with NGOs and research institutions to conduct this study and prepare an research-informed child marriage ending strategy.

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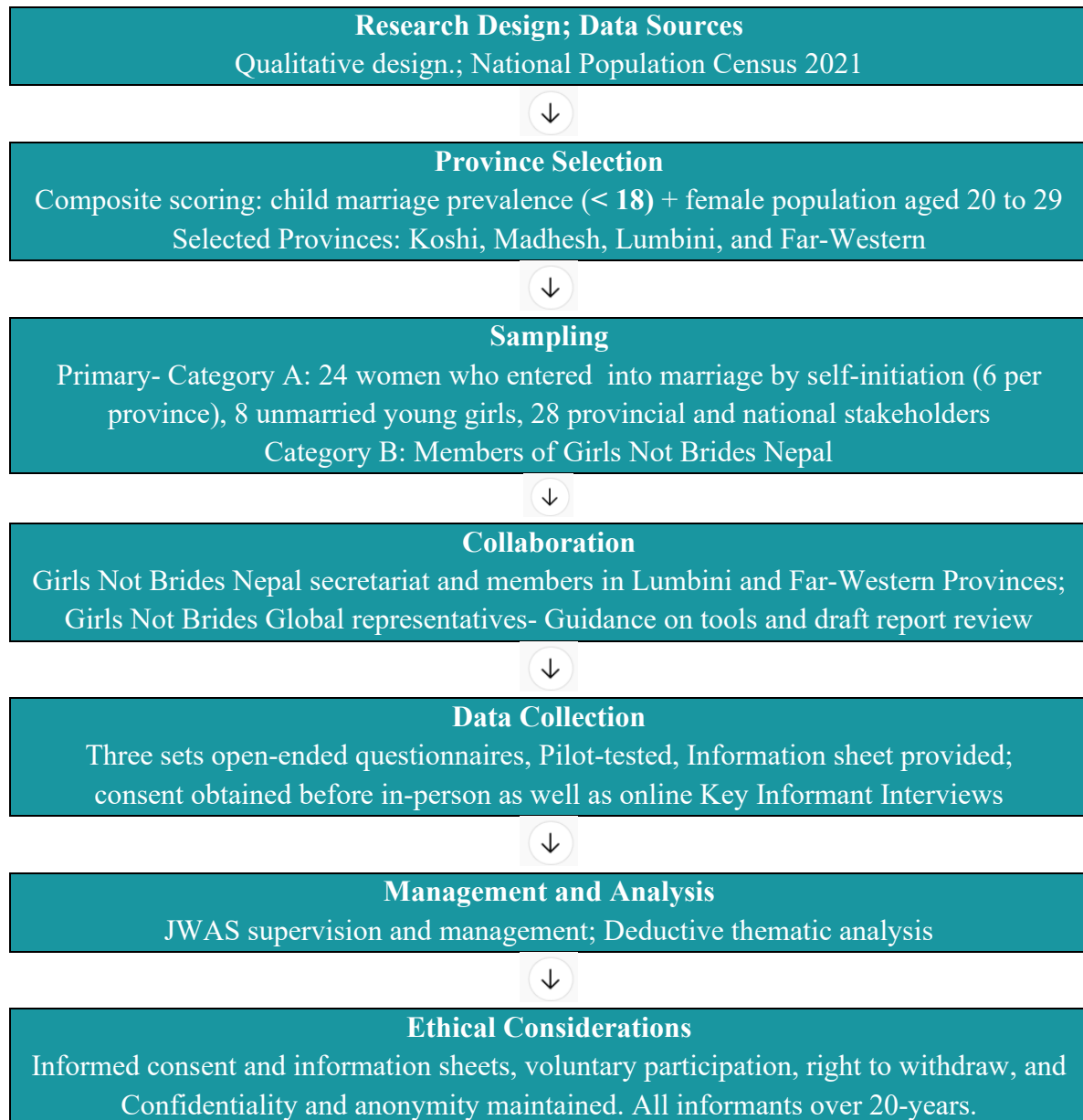
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Annex 1: Flowchart of Research Methodology

Figure 1: Flowchart of Research Methodology



Annex 2: More Information on Selection of Province

The study was conducted in four provinces out of the seven provinces in Nepal. They were selected purposively using a composite scoring method combining two indicators: the prevalence of child marriage before the age of 18, and the size of the female population aged 20 to 29 years.

Madhesh Province scored the highest (9) due to its highest prevalence of child marriage and its larger size of the female population aged 20 to 29 (*see Table 3*). Lumbini Province received a score of 7 due to a combination of high prevalence and a large population, while Far-Western Province obtained score of 6, reflecting high prevalence. Similarly, Koshi Province (score 6) was included because of its large female population.

Bagmati Province (**Table 3*), despite its large female population in the 20-29 age group, was excluded because it has the highest literacy rate (82.1 % compared with the national average of 76.2 %), including female literacy (76% compared with the national average of 69.4%) , lower gender-based violence among the 15 – 49 age group (17.4% compared with the national average of 23%), and the lowest child marriage prevalence (Ministry of Health et al., 2022; National Statistics Office, 2022).

Table 3: Composite Scoring of Provinces for Selection

Province	Child Marriage Prevalence (% <18)	Score (Prevalence)	Female Population (20–29)	Score (Population)	Composite Score	Decision
Madhesh	51.9	5	555,800	4	9	Selected
Lumbini	42.4	4	523,451	3	7	Selected
Far-West	44.9	4	269,459	2	6	Selected
Koshi	33.9	3	466,269	3	6	Selected
Bagmati	33.0	2	604,347	5	7	Excluded*
Karnali	44.4	4	162,961	1	5	Excluded
Gandaki	36.3	3	236,871	2	5	Excluded

Source: National Statistics Office, 2022.

Karnali and Gandaki, while showing moderate-to-high prevalence, were excluded due to their smaller female populations. The selection of province relied on prevalence data of child marriage before the age of 18 years. However, the selection of early married women included young women aged between 20 and 29 years at the time of interview, who entered into self-initiated marriages before they were 20. This allowed for retrospective accounts of their experiences, who were the primary informants of this research.

Annex 3: Collaboration and Research Management

The study was implemented in consultation with the secretariat of Girls Not Brides Nepal. The secretariat was consulted during developing questionnaires and other research processes. They also assisted in collecting information from Girls Not Brides Nepal members. Based on their recommendations, coordination was established with two organizations in Lumbini and Far-Western Provinces, namely Kapilvastu Integrated Development Services (KIDS) and Conscious Society for Social Development (CSSD) Kailali. These organizations deployed female researchers to assist the information collection process.

Similarly, senior officers of Girls Not Brides- The Global Partnership also provided input in questionnaire development and report review. The overall research process was supervised by the executive director, and management support was provided by the program manager of JWAS.

About Research on Early-Age Self-Initiated Marriage

This study explores the emerging trend of early-age self-initiated marriage among adolescent girls in Nepal, from the perspective of women and girls, which is one of the underexplored areas of child marriage in the country. Using a qualitative design, the research draws on key informant interviews with married women who entered into marriage by self-initiation, unmarried young women, and key stakeholders across four provinces: Koshi, Madhesh, Lumbini, and Far-Western. The findings reveal that peer influence, romantic and emotional pressures, social media, and mobile phones play central roles in shaping girls' decisions to initiate marriage at an early age. Socio-economic constraints, entrenched gender norms, migration, and exposure to modern lifestyles further interact to influence girls' choices. Informants consistently emphasized delaying marriage until at least age 20. The study highlights the need for multi-level interventions focused on education, digital literacy, and adolescent empowerment. The research also recommends further studies, including similar research from the perspectives of boys and men.

About Janaki Women Awareness Society

Janaki Women Awareness Society (JWAS) is a non-governmental and not for profit making civil society organization. It was established in 1993 A.D. (2050 B.S) in Dhanusha District. The organization was founded and is operated by a group of women social workers. It works to uplift the standard of living and empowerment of Marginalized Community, Women, Dalits, Youth, Janjatis, Persons with Disabilities, and Disaster Stricken and Conflict affected people of Nepal. For more information, visit: <https://jwas.org.np/>

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