

Early marriage patterns and parent-adolescent relationships in Dhanusha

STUDY REPORT 2023

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1. Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND SITUATION OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Nepal has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. As of 2019, 33% of Nepali women aged 20-24 were married before the age of 18, and 9% were married before the age of 15 (CBS, 2020)¹. The country is home to 5 million women who were child brides, and 1.3 million of them were younger than 15 at the time of marriage (UNFPA, 2021)². These numbers suggest that despite the recent reduction in the incidence of child marriage in Nepal, it remains a big problem and this can have profound consequences for the health and wellbeing of adolescent girls, their families and Nepal. Studies on child marriage find that early marriage is associated with higher incidence of early pregnancies, maternal mortality, school dropout rates and places girls at higher risk of intimate partner violence (Mahato, 2016³; Ghimire and Samuels, 2017⁴; Samuels and Ghimire, 2021⁵; Seeta, 2023⁶)

As in many other countries with high rates of child marriage, key drivers behind this harmful practice include poverty, gender inequality, patriarchal and harmful social and gender norms which place a lower value on girls and women, lack of education amongst girls, and weak legal frameworks to prevent child marriage (Seeta, 2023⁷). On social and gender norms, Bergenfeld et al (2020) found that although the minimum age of marriage is 20 for both boys and girls in Nepal, the strong cultural value placed on girls' virginity and purity contributes to child, early and forced marriage (OEFM) being more common for young women. A girl's virginity is closely tied to her family's honour, and social sanctions can be incurred if a girl is suspected to be at risk of or engaging in 'impure/intimate activities with boys. The social sanctions are applied to the girls as well as their parents – and especially their fathers who may be 'perceived as incapable of controlling their daughters and protecting their honor' (ibid). Fear of premarital pregnancy adds to the concern. Although parents are largely supportive of their daughters' access to education, this support is retracted if continuing school presents any threat to the girls' virginity or the family's reputation (Bergenfeld et al, 2020).

Considering these findings, it is clear that early marriage is perceived by many Nepali parents as a means of protecting both themselves and their daughters. The high levels of control exerted by parents is also a clear indicator of the strength of social norms and social sanctions related to girls' relationships and sexuality.⁸

Nepal has also seen an increasing rate of 'love' or self-initiated⁹ (by children/adolescents themselves) marriages among children, with some estimates indicating that over 50% of early marriages are self-initiated¹⁰. Although such marriages may indeed be initiated out of a genuine desire to be together, research suggests that children's decision to marry is often driven by other factors, including coercion¹¹ and parents' eagerness to avoid the social sanctions related to their daughters' relationships. Adolescents may also 'choose' to elope to avoid an arranged marriage to a spouse chosen without their involvement, to escape neglect and/or violence in the home, and/or to legitimize an intimate relationship and thus avoid social sanctions and rumours in the community^{12,13}.

Since fear that parents will choose a spouse without the adolescents' involvement is often reported as a reason for self-initiated marriages (ibid), it appears that lack of open communication between parents and adolescents as well as girls' lack of agency in their home may contribute to both arranged and self-initiated marriages. Regardless of whether the marriage is forced or self-initiated, the consequences remain harmful to both the well-being and future prospects of adolescents. It is important to explore the nature and patterns of parent-child communication in the context of child marriages, what other factors drive early forced and self-initiated marriages, and the possible programs that could be instituted to address them. This study explored these questions in the context of Dhanusha, Nepal.

1 Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 2021. Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, Survey Findings Report. Kathmandu, Nepal: Central Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Nepal.

2 UNFPA. 2021. UNFPA-UNICEF global programme to end child marriage. Country profile-Nepal. UNFPA

3 Mahato. S.K. 2016. Causes and Consequences of Child Marriage: A Perspective. International Journal Of Scientific & Engineering Research, Vol7(7) pp 698-720 www.ijser.org

4 Ghimire A and Samuels, F. 2017. Understanding intimate partner violence in Nepal through a male lens. London: Overseas Development Institute

5 Samuels, F and Ghimire A. 2021. Preventing school dropout and early marriage in Nepal: Review and scoping of the Beti Padhau Beti Bachau (BPBB) and the Bank Khata Chhoriko Suraksha Jiban Variko (BKCSJV) programmes (Provincial Girls Insurance/Girl Baby Bond schemes); London. Overseas Development Institute.

6 Seeta R. 2023. Child marriage and its impact on health: A study of perceptions and attitudes in Nepal. Journal of Global Health Reports. Vol 7. Pp www.jogh.org/article/88951-child-marriage-and-its-impact-on-health-a-study-of-perceptions-and-attitudes-in-nepal

7 Seeta R. 2023. Child marriage and its impact on health: A study of perceptions and attitudes in Nepal. Journal of Global Health Reports. Vol 7. Pp www.jogh.org/article/88951-child-marriage-and-its-impact-on-health-a-study-of-perceptions-and-attitudes-in-nepal

8 Bergenfeld et al (2020) Tipping Point Program Impact Evaluation: Baseline Study in Nepal. CARE USA and Emory University. https://caretippingpoint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TP-Phase-2-Baseline_Nepal.pdf

9 Save The Children, Norway (2020) Report on Self-Initiated Child Marriage.

10 Women's Rehabilitation Centre Nepal (2021) Redefining the early and child marriage and reconsidering its elimination in Nepal through absolute criminalization.

11 Women's Rehabilitation Centre Nepal (2021) Redefining the early and child marriage and reconsidering its elimination in Nepal through absolute criminalization. <https://www.worecnepal.org/uploads/publication/document/2133142066REDEFINING%20THE%20EARLY%20AND%20CHILD%20MARRIAGE.pdf>

12 Save the Children, Plan International and World Vision International (2012): Child Marriage in Nepal <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Child%20Marriage%20in%20Nepal-%20Report.pdf>

13 Save The Children, Norway (2020) Report on Self-Initiated Child Marriage.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Dhanusha is the provincial capital district of Madhesh Province which has the highest incidence of child marriage in Nepal: The national median age at first marriage among women who were 20-49 years of age in 2016 was 18.1 years while in the Madhesh Province, it was 16.5 years (MoH et. al; 2022)¹⁴.

Plan International is one of the organizations currently implementing a Child Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) program¹⁵ in five out of seventeen municipalities in Dhanusha district. It is funded by the Norwegian Broadcasting Company's (NRK) Telethon and will run from 2022 to 2026. The local implementer is Asman Nepal. The overall aim is to reduce child marriages and school dropout. The interventions in the program include: 1) training of teachers and parents in child rights and protection, code of conduct and inclusion; 2) training of adolescents, school staff, health clinic staff, and other local actors on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); 3) economic opportunities for girls and their families at high risk of CEFM through vocational skills, entrepreneurship skills or work-related skills 4) work on norms change, and 5) policy/civil society strengthening. The focus is on girls who are both in and out of school. Since 2022, Plan International Norway has also been supporting the Norad funded Girls Get Equal¹⁶ program in Nepal. The program will run until 2024.

Both the Telethon and the Girls Get Equal programs have a comprehensive approach to CEFM, including social norms change targeted at parents and communities. Multiple other programs to reduce child marriage have also been implemented by the government and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including scholarship programs, education insurance, savings groups, awareness raising, and establishment of child rights committees (Samuel and Ghimire, 2021). However, none of the programs include an intervention targeted specifically at parents although parents play an essential role in both forced and self-initiated early marriages. In the Plan programs, parents are only included within community awareness-raising activities under the social norms and behavioural change component¹⁷, and not targeted directly.

Considering several child marriage programs have been implemented in the last decade and recent surveys indicate a decline in early marriage, an updated assessment of which factors continue to contribute to early marriage is needed to explore whether new elements should be considered in future programs.



¹⁴ Ministry of Health, Nepal; New ERA; and ICF. 2022. Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2016. Kathmandu, Nepal: Ministry of Health, Nepal.

¹⁵ www.plan-international.org/uploads/sites/79/2022/04/Nepal-Annual-Highlights-2021_Plan-International-Final.pdf

¹⁶ www.plan-international.org/nepal/what-we-do/girls-get-equal/

2. Objectives and research questions

The objective of the formative study was to explore what kind of potential program components could reduce child marriages over and above the main components of the Telethon supported program and to understand factors that lead to self-initiated and forced child marriage. Additionally, the study aimed to explore if programs on improving parent-child relationships can help reduce forced and self-initiated early marriage.

The specific objectives of the research were to explore:

- Factors contributing to self-initiated and forced child marriages in Dhanusha
- The nature of and gender differences in parent-child relationships and communication
- Norms around parent-child communication
- Perceived relevance and potential designs of parenting interventions
- Perceived relevance and potential designs of an economic intervention

3. Research methodology

3.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY SITE

The study was conducted in the five municipalities where PLAN implements the Telethon program in Dhanusha district. Dhanusha district covers an area of 1180.7 km². The total population in 2021 was 838,083 with equal percentages of males and females². It is predominantly an agricultural district with over 64% of land being cultivable of which 90% is cultivated². Despite legal prohibition of bonded labour, these practices still persist in the agricultural sector in the district². While there is no district-wise disaggregation of data, Madhesh Province has the second highest incidence of multidimensional poverty at 24.2% (highest is Karnali Province- 40%), which is higher than the national average of 17.4% (NPC, 2021)¹⁸.

The literacy level is 50.4%, which is lower than the national average of 59.6% (as per census 2011)². There is also a significant gender gap in literacy between men and women; 61% of boys and men aged five and above are literate compared to 40% of girls and women of the same age².

3.2 STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative methodology. Study tools were adapted as we proceeded in response to emerging findings. Tools consisted of semi-structured guides for key informant interviews with relevant local stakeholders, case studies with girls and boys who married early, in-depth interviews with adolescent girls and boys and male and female parents, and focus group discussions with adolescents and parents. Males and females were interviewed separately following the local norms of Dhanusha. The sample size was initially planned

based on available resources with flexibility to change as required.

Seven key informant interviews, 22 in-depth interviews, 11 focus group discussions and 3 case studies were carried out as designed. In addition to the planned interviews, an informal discussion was carried out to include the views of some elderly people who wanted to give their opinions. Table 1 in Section 4 gives details of the types and number of respondents who were actually interviewed.

The research design was developed in consultation with Asman Nepal (the local partner), Plan International staff in Kathmandu and Plan Dhanusha field-level team members (referred to as research team hereafter). Communities were selected based on discussions with Plan Dhanusha and Asman Nepal team members. Once the communities were identified, the study used purposive sampling to select respondents. Local facilitators from Asman Nepal briefed the community about the research before the actual data collection started. Before entering the community, the researcher additionally briefed the gatekeepers and community members about the study. Letters were given in advance to selected schools identified by the research team to access in-school girls and boys. For out-of-school girls and boys, the local facilitator briefed the parents and obtained consent to include their children a few days before the actual fieldwork. Before interviews, the objective of the research, the types of questions that would be asked and details of ethical issues along with a contact number for further information was provided to all the respondents. Interviews were done in privacy and in a place that respondents preferred. These were usually in school premises, temples, community halls, community grounds or the respondent's own residence. Except when the respondents said they felt comfortable to give the answers in Nepali, all interviews were done in Maithali. The researcher understands Maithali but is not confident in speaking the language. A trained local translator from Asman Nepal, supported in translation of questions to the respondents when necessary.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews and discussions were conducted in Nepali and Maithali and audio recorded. Some interviews were summarised whereas the majority were transcribed verbatim and translated to English. In case of interviews in Maithali language, translators were used during interviews. Data analysis was done using Maxqda software. A draft code system was built using the tools used for the study and this was later modified based on the interview transcripts (Appendix-1). The transcripts were coded according to this system. The codes were later merged into larger themes.

18 Government of Nepal, Nepal Planning Commission. 2022. Nepal Multidimensional Poverty Index-2021.

3.3 ETHICS

The study followed PLAN's standard ethical approval protocols. Prior ethical approval was obtained from the PLAN IRB. At the local level, permission was sought from relevant local stakeholders, i.e. parents, school principals and ward offices through Asman Nepal. Before the interviews, oral consent was obtained in case of adult respondents, and guardians' written consent and respondents' oral assent in case of young adolescents.

following four sub-sections: 1.) changing marriage patterns including drivers of forced early marriage and self-initiated early marriage; 2.) challenges parents face regarding their adolescent children; 3.) adolescent-parent relationships; and 4.) perceptions about programs that would reduce early marriage.

4. Findings

This section describes the findings of the study. After a description of the study respondents, the findings in this section are divided into the



Table 1 describes the details of respondents in the study.

Tools	No of interviews	Respondent type
Key informant interviews		
Key informants	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff of PLAN Team: MEL Manager • Plan partner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Asman Nepal program manager b. Asman Nepal local facilitator • Ward chairman of Janaknadini rural municipality • Deputy mayor of Sahidnagar Municipality • 2 Principals of schools of the study area
In-depth interviews		
Parents	11 (5 mothers and 6 fathers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had daughters of marriageable age • Married off daughters early
Adolescents	11 (6 boys and 5 girls)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unmarried adolescent girls and boys, aged 16-20, both in and out of school
Focus group discussion (FGDs) ¹⁹		
Parents	4 (2 with fathers and 2 with mothers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With daughters of marriageable age or who married off daughters early
Community members from Muslim community	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal and School management committee members from Muslim school (Madarasa school)
Adolescent groups	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 groups with girls in school • 2 groups with boys in school • Girls out of school • Boys out of school
Case studies		
cases of early marriage	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 women who were married before 18 years (<25 years old) • 1 Boy who married early
Informal discussion group		
Fathers and grandfathers	1	

¹⁹ (Each FGD had between 6-8 participants)

4.1 CHANGING MARRIAGE PATTERNS

Respondents had mixed views regarding the changing nature and patterns of early marriages in their communities. While fathers of adolescents believed that it was still more common for parents to marry off their children early rather than children marrying early on their own, mothers believed that most early marriages were self-initiated.

«Out of 100%, 95% of them will marry daughters at an early age, and only 5% will understand.»

IDI, two male parents.

Most participants, except fathers, believed that self-initiated marriage was on a rise in the community. When self-initiated, marriages are also largely early according to the respondents. Fathers who participated in the focus group discussions perceived that if children fall in love, they tend to marry at a later age nowadays and thus they believed that self-initiated marriages are not early marriages as shown in the quote below.

Adult male respondents who participated in the focus group discussions (FGDs) believed that the lowest age of marriage has increased from 10 years previously to 15 years for girls, with a subsequent increase also for boys. All respondents were aware that the legal age of marriage is 20 years, but both male and female adult participants thought that this was too late for girls in their community as shown in the quote below:

«It is too late for girls here. Who will take responsibility? Girls from Madhesh do not stop from falling in love and stay unmarried until they are 20 years old. Out of 100 girls, 1 or 2 will be unmarried till then- all others will have chosen their husbands before the age of 20.»

- Informal discussion, men.

While key informants and adolescents believed that the age of girls is lower in parent-initiated marriages, the mothers in the FGD claimed that the age of marriage is lower when they are self-initiated. In group discussions, adolescents shared that the risk of marriage for girls starts when they are 16 years of age.

«Twenty years is a good age in my perception. However, their mother's perception may be fourteen, fifteen, twelve, thirteen, sixteen is good to get married. Only a few of them reach the age of 18. Otherwise, fifteen or sixteen- they are married off.»

IDI, mother of adolescents.

4.1.1 Drivers of forced early marriage

The main drivers of forced early marriages for girls were fear of children self-initiating marriage and causing them embarrassment and fear of the community to stand up against entrenched norms, low parental education and limited exposure to job opportunities, dowry and marriage costs, having many girl children, and girls dropping out of education.

Interviews and discussions with all types of participants indicated that fear that girls will have love affairs and cause stigmatisation of themselves and the family is prevalent among the parent generation. Most parents who participated in the study were fearful when girls were in school (and thus out of their sight) thinking they were having love affairs and roaming around with boys instead of studying. Adolescent girls who participated in the study shared that when there has been one incident of self-initiated marriage in the community, there would be a huge pressure from parents on all girls in the community, and some parents would force their daughters to get married immediately out of fear.

«They (girls) usually lie to parents that they are going to school and fall into bad habits. They do not understand what is love at that age but they feel that they are in love. It is better if they do everything (meaning love affairs) once they reach a proper age. They have love affairs even when they are as small as 12 years old. Parents think that they would marry off their children when they are at least 20 years of age, but the children will not agree. In this village, one of the biggest issues is this; from an early age children get trapped in marriage.»

Case study, adolescent girl who married early and is now a parent.

This was also mentioned in interviews with mothers. Mothers who had married off their girls before the age of 20 admitted that they had done it out of fear. Other mothers of adolescents shared that while they would like to marry their daughters after 20 years of age, they feared stigmatisation and ostracization from the community if their unmarried daughters were seen hanging around with boys when going to school. In interviews with parents, this came as one of the greatest challenges parents have when bringing up adolescents.

Respondent: *«As they (children) elope and because of its fear, parents marry off their children at the age of fifteen-sixteen.»*

FGD with mothers

Men and adolescent girls who participated in the interviews believed that if parents are educated and have jobs, they are more lenient and open-minded due to exposure to other parts of the country. In such cases, they will discuss love affairs and early marriage with their children and counsel them not to self-initiate early marriage. However, if parents do not have much exposure to other cultures or if they do not have education, they were perceived to be more likely to force their daughters to get married. We also found that mothers who had education or had a job that required her to have interactions with various kinds of ethnic groups such as in social work, had married their daughters after age 20.

Some mothers and fathers did not support the norms of their ethnic groups but did not feel able to act against them due to fear of reactions from the community. They claimed that in other ethnic groups

where girls do not face stigmatisation even if they choose their partners by themselves, it is easy for the parents to keep girls unmarried till an older age but this was not the case for them.

M2: In our Terai region people fear of losing prestige in case their daughter elopes. People might say, «See, she is walking like nothing happened though her daughter has eloped.»

M1: People do not feel ashamed even if their children elope in hilly region. They think 'it's fine, they will live their life'.

M2: In our village area people will say «I saw his/her daughter was talking to someone»

FGD with mothers.

Another common reason for early marriage of girls was dowry and marriage costs. While the dowry system is illegal, the interviews indicated that it is still highly practiced. Key informants shared that even the police did not pay attention to it. All study participants shared that as the dowry price increases with the age of girls, parents tend to marry off girls when they are young. This was very evident in a couple of case studies. We also found that 14-16 years old girls were married to older men in India because the dowry was substantially lower than what they would have had to pay for a same-age marriage in Nepal. Such older men were typically widowed or had left their first wives.

P: «Men marrying the second time ask for less. Even though, they ask for bed and other kitchen items. One to one and half lakh rupee is spent on the marriage (in such case in total).»

IDI, girl who married early.

Parents marrying off their daughters with older men in India to save money appeared more common in areas near the border. Due to open borders and pre-established relationships, the groom's family would often approach the bride's family and fix the dowry price. According to a respondent who was married in India to a man of the same age, she had to pay 80,000 NPR (604 USD) in cash, 300 gram silver and 4 gram gold, while to get her sister married to an older man in India, they could get away with giving a bed and kitchen items only. The total cost for the sister's marriage (with dowry and feasts for the groom's family, gift for the grooms family and feast for the community) came to 150,000 NPR (1133 USD) while in her own case, the dowry alone was more than that.

In case of men who went for foreign employment to the Gulf and other countries, there tended to be a significant age gap between the bride and the groom. Since they had earned money from foreign employment, parents felt that the daughter's future was secure with them and hence married their young girls to them. In our study, brides were found to be as young as 14 years at the time of marriage and the grooms were in their late 20s in such cases.

Some parents who took part in the study shared that parents who had

many daughters tended to start marrying off their daughters early so they could get time to save for the next daughter's marriage. This was also confirmed by respondents who had many daughters.

«I will share my own thing. Once I told my sixteen-year-old daughter to marry, and she responded that «Mummy, why are you telling me like this? Let me complete 12 grade at least». Of course, I will have a fear as I have 4 daughters with me. If at once I have to marry them, I will not be able to fund their marriage as I also have a poor economic background.»

IDI, mother of adolescents

In one community, pornography and sexual violence against girls by young boys were mentioned as drivers of forced early marriage. One respondent shared that it is common for boys to circulate fake pornographic pictures of local girls and spread rumours that the girls are having relationships with them. She shared that young men who married early also sexually attack other girls when their wives are pregnant. In such cases, parents have tended to marry off the girls as soon as they can.

«They talk over phone and share the wrong (meaning pornographic) photographs. When the parents hear these from others, they scold their daughters, beat them and get their daughter married, looking for a groom and quickly marrying them off. Girls' naked photos are in boys' mobiles and there is a rumor that the girl has lived (meaning has had a relationship) with that boy. No one has seen the photograph but the gossip spreads. The girl says that there is no naked photo of her. Rumor gets in the air and the girl's parents get their daughters married. And so do the boy's parents. If any boy and girl talk to each other, there is a rumor that they are in relationship.»

Case study, girl who married early.

Poor learning environments such as the lack of teachers, over-populated classrooms, negligence in teaching, absence of basic infrastructures in schools, and lack of awareness of parents on the importance of educating children have fostered drop-out in Dhanusha. Once they drop out, adolescents take on adult roles- such as earning for the family for boys and household management for girls. Fear on the part of parents that children will go against the established norms and disgrace the family name, pushes parents to marry them as early as possible once they stop school.

The parent generation who participated in the study claimed that boys are not forced into early marriage and they only marry early if they have love affairs. Adolescent boys shared that forced early marriage for boys would sometimes occur if parents wanted household help, for example, when the mother was sick and when parents suspected that the son had fallen into bad company, was addicted to drugs, had dropped out of education, had love affairs, or planned foreign employment. Drop-out of education was both mentioned as a

result as well as a driver of early marriage for both boys and girls.

4.1.2 Drivers of self-initiated early marriage

Respondents had mixed opinions regarding self-initiated early marriages. Both adolescent boys and girls who participated in the study believed that fear that boyfriends and girlfriends would be separated by the parents was the main driver of self-initiated marriage. According to them, parents would typically not allow them to marry their boyfriends/girlfriends, but rather force them to marry a person that the parents choose. Hence if young people have love affairs, they tended to go for self-initiated marriage at an early age. This would be more likely if a girl and a boy are from different castes or religions. In such cases, after marriage, the young couple would often go and live in India for a short time to avoid being separated forcefully by parents. Mothers, adolescents and key informants shared stories of parents who forcibly had separated such couples and inflicted physical violence, particularly on the girls.

4.2 CHALLENGES PARENTS FACE WITH REGARDS TO ADOLESCENTS

The two main challenges parents highlighted when raising their adolescent children were having to face dowry expenses for adolescent girls and disobedience. Parents of girls were worried about dowry and getting her married before they start to get interested in the opposite sex. Many parents shared that they would need at least 12-13 lakhs (i.e. 120,0000-130,0000 NPR or around USD 10,000) for a normal dowry in Dhanusha. This did not include the costs of the marriage ceremony and feast which should be lavish according to local ideals. For some households, this meant saving years of their earnings:

«I have paid 14 lakhs. We bought a motorbike paying 3.25 lakhs, 2 lakh cash, 20-gram gold, furniture and other things to run a house to give him. All the lands are mortgaged at Agriculture Bank. Now we have lots of problem that we cannot speak of. I myself know how much tears rolled down from my eyes. What to do now?»

FGD, mother of adolescents.

Challenges regarding dowry were also mentioned in interviews with fathers of adolescents:

«People sell their property to give dowry. People spent earnings of their whole life on dowry. If we save the money for 10 years then only, we can get one daughter's marriage done. Simple marriage needed 12/13 lakh rupee.»

FGD, father of adolescents.

Interviews also indicated that parents linked the cost of dowry with investments they could potentially do in educating their daughters. They shared that the challenge in educating girls was that they would have to invest both in education as well as in paying a higher dowry price as they would need an educated groom for an educated girl.

«Even if daughters are educated, they have to give dowry to the groom's family and presents to the grooms' extended family members. For educated girls, parents must search educated boys and so have to save money for marriage as well as dowry. If it does not happen, then there won't be compatibility between boy and girl and they might divorce.»

FGD, father of adolescents.

Another challenge perceived by parents was disobedience. Mothers who participated in the study perceived that adolescent did not obey the parents and it was very difficult for parents to get children to obey them if there was a conflict of interest. They shared that children had committed suicide or threatened to do so if parents tried to enforce anything (such as denying to give them money or choosing their partner in marriage). Thus, they were often fearful when they rejected something that their adolescent children asked for.

«They demand money and threaten to hang themselves or take poison if their parents do not give it to them.»

FGD, mother of adolescents.

However, interviews with adolescents did not verify this. They were of the opinion that coercion is used for early marriage by parents, and young boys had to leave education to earn an income because the parents would repeatedly bring up the issue of costs of education and the cost of bringing them up.

4.3 ADOLESCENT-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION

4.3.1 Parents' perceptions towards adolescents

We found that the community as well as parents generally had negative perceptions towards adolescents. They often referred to how difficult they were. Some parents expressed distrust and repetitively talked about problematic behaviours of adolescents as mentioned above while others mentioned that the problem is in parenting practices. In other cases, parents thought the fault was not with adolescents but society today, including the access to technology. They attributed the challenges they experienced to the modern more comfortable way of life that children nowadays have compared to what they themselves experienced as children. This led parents to worry that children would not be able to face hardships in their future lives and thus would not be successful when they grow up.

M5: *«They have a more comfortable life.»*

M2: *«Children who study in difficulty can go ahead in their life but those who live comfortable life cannot go ahead.»*

FGD, fathers of adolescents.

Parents often blamed the misuse of mobile phones for creating behavioural challenges among adolescents. Some male parents attributed this to the fault of parents themselves, giving examples from

religious texts about how parents today are in a delusion and provide material things (mobile phones) to children to show love instead of disciplining them.

«I see in the evening, in a group of 5 boys they have at least two mobiles in their hand and watch whatever they want. The main thing is children are 5 / 7 years old. They have wifi. There can be various things in Facebook and Youtube. There dirty things can appear. Now, guardians have to think if it is good to give them mobile or not. Their mind gets corrupted watching negative things in the mobile. Majority of children are spoiled because of mobiles. Ninety percent of children in rural area are spoiled because of mobiles».

FGD, father of adolescents.

Parents believed that in households where parents took care of children and were concerned about how they were spending their leisure time, were vigilant about whether they were going to school regularly, and had regular interaction with the teachers, adolescents would not have behaviour problems. They shared that in their community parents who send their children to government schools do not pay attention to adolescents due to various reasons, do not care if the child goes to school or the teachers are regular in class, and do not ask why their children return from school early when they do so. They believed that such negligence on the part of parents is the reason for problems among adolescents. They also emphasized that parents should regularly meet with teachers, but this was currently not the case with parents of children who studied in government schools. Male parents who participated in the interviews also held views that if parents ensure that adolescents get less leisure time, i.e. they are either in school or under the care of parents at home, adolescents are less likely to have behaviour problems. Key informants and male parents believed that behaviour problems with adolescents were also more likely in households where the father was absent or where parents gave money to their children. They believed it was difficult for the mother to control boys, in particular when fathers were absent, and that boys would often not obey their mother, fall into bad company, drug abuse and drop out of school.

«Mothers cannot do that much surveillance of their children. Boys aged 12, 13, 14, and 15 consume alcohol, take marijuana, and smoke cigarettes together. They ask for money from their mothers by making different threats.» IDI, father of adolescents.

In the case study interviews, boys who had dropped out of school and whose fathers were absent from home for a long time due to work, shared that they had peers who used drugs.

4.3.2 Parent-adolescent communication about puberty, sexuality and marriage

In general, neither parents nor adolescents felt that they had difficulties communicating with each other but in practice it was not about

sensitive issues around sexuality, marriage, and pregnancy... Mothers would initiate conversations with both their male and female children about any potential attraction to the opposite sex and when to enter into marriage, and felt comfortable doing so, but based on the few interviews we did, this kind of talk did not appear to be common between fathers and children. Fathers shared that they would feel embarrassed to initiate conversations around these issues. Mothers claimed that they considered what their child needed at each age, i.e. they would teach a girl about managing menstruation when she reached menarche, and about not being interested in boys, to keep away from love affairs until they were ready, to avoid early marriage, and to study hard to do well in life. However, none of the interviewed mothers had discussed family planning with their unmarried girls, but they said they would sometimes talk about it with married daughters.

Fathers claimed that they had no challenges in communicating about sexuality and puberty with their sons, but appeared to do so more indirectly than mothers. They shared that they would tell their sons to “walk on a good path” and be “a good person” instead of explicitly bringing up relationships, sex and the changes that adolescents go through. In addition to being embarrassed to do so, they expected children somehow to get information around these topics from elsewhere as they come of age like they did themselves. According to a father who was interviewed, he had not discussed such topics with his son who was in college as he focused on understanding if the son was studying well and if he had fallen into any bad peer group. He thought it was more important to ensure that the son gets a good education and builds a foundation for a good career in life. He believed that as his son becomes older, he will eventually learn about such issues from friends or school and through his own experiences, and he thought this would make it less embarrassing for him as a father to discuss such issues if he had to. Other fathers who participated in the interview also shared the similar views.

Fathers who participated in the interviews said they would never discuss puberty and sexuality with their girl children because it is not socially acceptable for fathers to do so in their community. They shared that they trusted that the mothers would teach the girls everything when the right time comes. If the fathers learnt anything that would be important for the girls, they would tell the mothers and ask her to communicate to the daughter. As with sons, the fathers thought that their daughters should also be focusing on their education.

Both girls and boys shared that they did not talk about sexuality with their parents. While daughters could discuss menstruation and relationships with the opposite sex with their mothers, the boys said they did not talk to mothers about these topics. Girls felt that it was good to know about puberty and sexuality from books and teachers as they thought their mothers did not know much about it. Girls who had attended extra-curricular classes (such as the Champions of Change classes run by PLAN) shared that they had been able to teach their

mothers about menstruation management and now the mothers had started using sanitary pads after learning from them. Both girls and boys said they were comfortable discussing general things with the mothers but would not initiate conversations about love affairs or sexuality, family planning and pregnancy with them. They confirmed that it was the mother who would initiate such conversations or counsel about it, while fathers would only touch upon these topics indirectly. The interviewed girls mentioned that when there was a self-initiated marriage in the community, mothers tended to bring up the issue of elopement and counsel them not to fall into love affairs and marry early in life. In a couple of cases, girls felt they had a very close relationship with their mother and could share that they were attracted to a boy. We also found a case where a mother had stopped her young daughter from marrying early by counselling her and giving her time to reflect on her relationship with the boy, and in another case a mother had convinced her daughters that she would not object to self-initiated marriage if the girls first focused on completing higher education and getting a career.

Most of the girls who participated in the study shared that after they entered puberty, they had stopped chatting or had less interaction with the father. One participant shared that she had completely stopped talking with the father after she was engaged because she felt shy. In most cases, girls said fathers would ask the mother about them rather than talking to them directly. Boys said they never talked about issues of marriage, puberty or sexuality with the father. In general boys and fathers rarely talked. The boys had the impression that their father expected the mother to relay any important information to the children, and both boys and girls would also expect the mother to relay information they needed to give to the father. For example, when a boy wanted to get married, he had shared it with the mother. Similarly, when they needed money, they would tell the mother and she would ask the father on their behalf.

The interviewed boys mentioned that most of the conversations between them and their fathers were about their studies. Boys who had left education and taken jobs had less interaction with fathers than those who were still in school. A couple of older adolescent boys who had dropped out of school, had taken up wage work or had married, said that they had shared their intentions to drop out of school, to take jobs or that they wanted to marry a certain girl with the mother and not with the father. A couple of boys mentioned that the communication with the father was often restricted to questions like *«have you eaten something?»*.

The boys shared that their knowledge about puberty and sexuality came most prominently from course books and teachers. Some boys shared that if the teachers had responded well to questions they had asked about these topics. If they were curious, boys had also asked their cousins or uncles who were slightly older than them or they would discuss in their own peer group.

«I have my uncle. He is only a few years older than me though he is my uncle. I would go to the teachers if I had any curiosity about puberty issues and the teacher would tell me. I also asked this uncle when he was around. I am not embarrassed to talk about anything with him.»

IDI, adolescent boy in school.

Adolescent boys shared that while it would be good if parents could teach about sexuality and attraction to the opposite sex etc, they felt their need for information about this was covered by others:

R: *«Now you are growing, there are changes in your body, you might like a girl. With whom do you talk about these things?»*

P: *«I do not talk with parents about these. Rather I talk with my friends»*

R: *«Does your father talk to you about the changes in your body and warn you to be aware about the girls?»*

P: *«No»*

R: *«Does your mother tell these things?»*

P: *«No»*

R: *«Do you think that it would be better if someone would teach you about these things?»*

P: *«Yes»*

IDI, adolescent boy out of school

When we spoke about support for children, parents largely referred to the tangible things they would provide to their children and not about communication. This included monetary support for education, dowry and marriage for the girls and seed money for sons to open a business. There was a case where a daughter who was forced to marry early by the parent faced domestic violence in marriage and was brought back by the parents to live with themselves. They had decided to keep the daughter with them and were thinking of opening a small shop for her so she could have an income.

4.3.3 Children's space in decision-making

The study also explored decision-making spaces in education and marriage. While parents did not directly tell children to drop out of school, the children often had no alternatives due to circumstances in the family such as missing classes due to household work, or parents regularly bringing up lack of financial means to fund education with their sons.

In relation to marriage, none of the married girls had been asked about their preferred age of marriage, preferred age difference between them and the partner, choice of marriage partner, or marrying without completing education. Girls who had protested against marriage had failed, and those who had agreed to get married or engaged at an early age, shared they accepted it due to parental pressure. While mothers had shared that they experienced fear that children might commit suicide, it did not seem to change things for girls in terms of decision-making around marriage. The fact that girls did not get decision-making space in marriage was also confirmed by parents

who had married off their daughters. They shared that they had forced early marriage upon their daughters using social pressure, and they mentioned that some parents (not them) also use violence to get girls married. Boys confirmed that girls did not get decision-making space and faced a risk of violence if they did not obey their parents. We found many girls who were married to older men or men in India without them getting to voice their opinions. Out-of-school girls who participated in the focus groups felt that it was justified for a girl to choose to self-initiate marriage if parents forced her to marry an older returnee migrant or a man she did not know anything about. In the case of boys, parents and community members were more lenient, depending on conditions. In one case, a boy had married despite his parents not wanting him to get married at an early age and another had refused to get married when the parent asked him to do so. The parents had accepted and had not resorted to physical violence as was common in the case of girls.

4.4 PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE USEFULNESS OF ECONOMIC INCENTIVES, PARENTING AND LIVELIHOOD PROGRAMS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

We asked parents, adolescents, and key informants if there were programs or people that help parents discuss issues they are facing with their adolescents and from where they can get suggestions. According to parents, there were no such opportunities for them. If they needed support they need related to parenting, they sometimes discussed what troubled them with their friends or older people who were respected in the community. Some schools, with the support of PLAN Nepal, also ran parent-teacher interactions programs, but these were infrequent and of short duration. Since the fathers were typically away, it was usually the mothers who participated in such interactions.

Respondents shared that there were a few programs in the community which had brought changes such as reduced marriage, helped girls and boys learn about SRHR issues from formal sources, reduced drop-out from school, or helped girls who dropped out, re-join school. The most appreciated program by adolescent girls and a few mothers was the “Champions of Change” program. This program, funded by PLAN and run by local NGOs, included extra-curricular classes with adolescent girls and boys. The classes ran every week on Saturdays (when schools were closed) for a few hours in the community hall and were led by a trained local facilitator. The classes included discussions on SRHR, career building, early marriage and relationships with the opposite sex. However, due to limited funding, the classes had limited capacity. The “Champions of Change” program also periodically invited and had interactions with parents. The facilitator shared that this was not as a part of the program but an extra effort based solely on her decision when she saw the need. The facilitator made sure to call fathers as well or went to visit them at their houses when needed or when she happened to pass by the community. If there were any issues that a girl was worried about, such as feeling at risk of early marriage or drop-out from education, the facilitator had conversations with the parents. During the first year of running the program, the

local facilitator had already helped two girls get back to school and a couple to avoid drop-out.

Respondents also mentioned a livelihood training for girls who had dropped out of school among the beneficial programs. The training was carried out by a local NGO in collaboration with the ward office. The study respondents really appreciated that the program included an open call for applications from girls in the community. This had not happened before as usually leaders handpicked their relatives for programs. Once the participants were selected, they were given a 3 months training on tailoring and seed money for a joint tailoring shop. The program had supported married girls who were otherwise sitting idle. They had now started making an income.

We explored whether respondents believed economic incentives and livelihood programs could help stop early marriage. Both male and female parents were of the opinion that economic incentives to the household, even if given on condition that the child is married off late, were unlikely to deter parents from marrying their children early. They believed other reasons would push parents into marrying their daughters. In cases where households had many daughters to marry off, where parents feared that their daughters would be lured into love or have relationships with boys, when there were cases of self-initiated marriages in the community, or when neighbours gossiped about their daughter, parents would feel forced to marry off their daughter despite incentives. Given the cost of dowry and the marriage feast increase exponentially, the financial incentives that were offered in current programs were not expected to be enough to keep parents from marrying off girls.

Instead both male and female parents shared that a combination of skill training, extra-curricular classes and seed money to the children themselves would be better to stop child marriage. According to respondents, if adolescents are given skill trainings according to their choice, they are more likely to be engaged in productive activities after school and would probably also value learning at school. According to them such trainings should be given to both boys and girls to stop early marriage. When it is combined with extracurricular classes where a professional teaches them about life-skills, they believed it would help adolescents make sensible decisions, keep their mind occupied with learning, they would not be engaged in love affairs and not go for early marriage. The respondents thought that this would also deter parents from marrying off their children early. Once children are engaged in productive activities, learn vocational skills along with education, have some earning from their own entrepreneurship, are well behaved and are using their time wisely, parents would probably feel safe and be less afraid of elopement of their children. According to respondents, this is also likely to make parents negotiate over dowry costs with the groom's family and potentially reject the offer if the dowry cost is too high and could reduce early marriage due to fear of high dowry costs.

Some of the topics parents thought should be included in the life-skills curriculum were the importance of education, importance of listening to and obeying parents, what happens during puberty, how to handle their bodily and emotional changes during puberty safely, negative consequences of falling in love at an early age, early marriage and leaving education.

Parents also mentioned that they would like to have classes where children are engaged in sports or other activities such as dancing, learning languages, building children's confidence in speaking and financial literacy among others. According to parents this would help them become more confident and develop extra skills. They shared that such classes would be good if they happen a few times a week after school and on Saturdays for a longer time (2-3 hours) when there is a holiday. The respondents thought that other parents in the community would also be willing to send their children if such classes were held. Regarding financial incentives, parents were of the opinion that financial support in the form of seed money to start entrepreneurship based on what the adolescents learnt in the training would be good but it should only be given when children reach secondary education and not before.

We also explored the perceived relevance of a parent-child communication program. According to the respondents, this would be new but useful to them. Regarding the model of the program, the most common suggestion was to have classes where mothers and fathers are kept together. They were of the opinion that if such classes were carried out 1-2 times a month, fathers would be more likely to attend because they are usually busy. The content that should be included according to the respondents would be why it is important to spend time with children and understand them- and particularly for fathers, child marriage, dowry, why marrying off girls is dangerous to their health, and how to build better relationships with children. Respondent also felt that an ideal time for parent trainings would be Saturday around early noon when they have a holiday and have finished household chores. We asked if children should also be brought in the class with parents. In this case, both parents and adolescents shared that initially it would be good to have separate classes for parents and children. Both parents and adolescents believed that if brought together from the start, they would not be able to speak due to shyness and the sensitivity of the topics. However, after receiving awareness classes separately, the parents and children could be brought together for joint discussions of some topics.

Many of the fathers in the community were away in the Gulf countries or Malaysia or had migrated internally for employment. According to respondents, in such cases, running classes virtually during the holidays would be possible. Respondents shared that in such cases, the mothers in the household would inform the fathers about the program. They shared that IMO or Messenger would be the best apps as they all used both the apps to chat in the family.

Besides the above, a few male parents also highlighted the importance programs that help in improving schools, such as more monitoring of schools through parents' active engagement in the education of their children and close interaction between parents and schools. These respondents thought that there is a gap in communication between teachers and parents, and parents are not aware about the importance of close communication with teachers and the importance of being vigilant about their children. They felt that such negligence has affected the quality of education and children lose interest and rather focus on activities that are not beneficial for their future. They felt that schools along with parents should ensure that children are active in productive activities even during their leisure time such as through sports etc. rather than being isolated and using mobile phones without supervision of elders.

5. Discussion

Dowry and marriage costs appear to be some of the main driving factors of child marriage currently in Dhanusha. Similar findings have also been shown by earlier studies in Nepal such as by Bergenfeld et al (2020), UNFPA (2021), Save the Children Norway (2020) and Women's Rehabilitation Centre Nepal (2021). Besides this, changing marriage patterns, particularly, perceived growth in self-initiated marriage and related fear of stigmatization among parents, also contribute to forced early marriages in the district. This also resonates with findings of recent studies done by Plan (2020) and Save the Children (2020). The society in Dhanusha has traditional gender ideals which emphasises girls' purity, and despite urbanization, communal life and social approval by the community are still the most important parameters of social life. Social sanctions are feared more than the national laws, as illustrated by the fact that early marriages continue despite the government imposing fines, including imprisonment, if the parties are caught. However, the growing national emphasis on education and gender empowerment has also reached Dhanusha, and parents are sending girl children to school. Girls are now exposed to the world outside their household - a possibility not available to the earlier generation of women in the community. This change in girls' opportunities has interfered with established gender ideals and challenged existing values which may have contributed to the parental generation being fearful and expressing concerns about adolescents in general and girls in particular. The communication gap between parents and adolescents and lack of space for adolescent girls to make sound decisions, unfortunately prevent adolescents from exploiting the available opportunities and lead some adolescents to self-initiate early marriage instead. It is plausible that a targeted parenting program that helps parents and adolescents foster an environment of close communication, trust and open discussions may reduce parental fears around self-initiated marriage and the fears among children that promote self-initiated marriages.

While studies highlight that early marriage leads to drop-out of school (see for example, Marphatia et al, 2022²⁰), there is a lack of studies in the region that look at how often and under what circumstances drop-out leads to early marriage and who are most likely to be affected by it. While this was not explored in-depth in this study due to time and resource constraints, there were indications that drop-out from school potentially contributes both to forced and self-initiated early marriage for girls and boys. This needs to be studied further. The findings from the study indicate that significant work needs to be done in improving learning environments and keeping children in education. Having close parent-teacher relationships, teachers who feel dedicated to provide quality education, and strong mechanisms to monitor teachers' activities, adequate infrastructure (such as enough classrooms, toilets, science and digital technology labs) and sports activities, and ensuring adolescents are busy and spending time in learning activities, would help in reducing self-initiated marriages according to parents. This would also to some extent reduce forced early marriage in cases where parents marry their children early due to fear of elopement.

Teachers were mentioned as an important source who filled gaps related to information on SRHR and early marriage, particularly for boys. Further studies are needed to explore if there is a potential to bring parents and teachers together to curb early marriage and give age-appropriate SRHR information to boys and girls.

Respondents were sceptical to economic incentives to stop child marriage but believed that life-skill trainings combined with vocational training to adolescents, seed money and entrepreneurship and financial literacy to older adolescents would be helpful. They believed that this would not only help engage adolescents in productive activities, but would also make parents feel less need to marry off their children early. Their recommendations are in line with the findings from studies (Harper et al, 2018²¹; Stavropoulou, 2018²²; World Bank, 2021²³; UNICEF, 2021²⁴; Savina and Moran, 2022²⁵) that indicate that programmes that advance the health, nutrition, education and practical skills of girls can delay early marriage and childbearing. Such programs can also contribute to the wellbeing of adolescents and better prepare them for a successful transition to adulthood. In Dhanusha, such opportunities are rarely available for girls and become non-existent once girls leave school. Unless the broader context in which adolescents' lives are embedded, particularly around education, learning environment and transition to careers, are not improved, early marriage might still continue. Programs that foster an environ-

ment for the community and parents to understand their adolescent children, create awareness of alternative ways of bringing up adolescents, and support parents with information on how to bridge the current communication gaps, may be a useful first step. Programs that break the traditional dowry system are also needed.

6. Conclusion

This study found that traditional drivers of early marriage such as dowry are still important in Dhanusha district. Fear that children will self-initiate marriage is growing among parents as girls and boys interact more freely now than in previous generations. This fear was also seen to significantly drive early marriage. Other drivers such as dropping out of school, negative perceptions of the community towards adolescents combined with communication gaps between parents and adolescents, and traditional ways of bringing up children using fear and power by elders, also appear to be important in driving early marriage. Self-initiated marriages appear to have brought a vicious cycle of misunderstanding between parents and adolescents and contribute to the continued practice of forced early marriages.

Both boys and girls felt more comfortable discussing their concerns with their mothers than their fathers, but the interviews indicated that most parents focused on conveying specific messages to their children, such as the importance of working hard in school, rather than having open dialogues and listening to the concerns of their children. Both parents and adolescents were sceptical to offering economic incentives to end child marriage, but believed that a parenting intervention could be relevant.

We conclude that addressing CEFM would require multiple interventions that target parents and adolescents in addition to society as a whole. The inadequacies of parent-child interaction means that there is need for more evidence on what programs can be used to improve this interaction and whether such interactions would help to reduce early marriages. Further, it is important to explore how schools, learning environments and teachers could play a role to reduce early marriages.

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